

The Only Good Thing That Can Last

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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VOL. 2, ISSUE 5

SEPT./OCT./NOV. 2017

JUSTIN TRUDEAU

HE'S SO DREAMY!
BUT ALSO, HE SUCKS.

ANTIFA!

WHAT ARE THEY
GOOD FOR?

THE NAZIS

COULD THEY ACTUALLY
BE LEFTISTS? (NO.)

WIDESPREAD STUPIDITY

PROBABLY NOT
UNIQUE TO OUR TIME.

ADULTS ONLY

FEATURES EXPLICIT SEX
AND JEREMY CORBYN
UNDRESSED...



we'll be there...



...when you need us most.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Due to an unfortunate mishap in the production process, the official Table of Contents was mislaid and cannot be located.

All that remains of the original document is this blurry photograph of the editor's early notes for the Table, which may or may not fully correspond to the pages of the final edition. We apologize for the transgression and will accept any punishment you feel would be reasonable to inflict.

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ISSUE NINE

Not for circulation

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THE MIDDLE

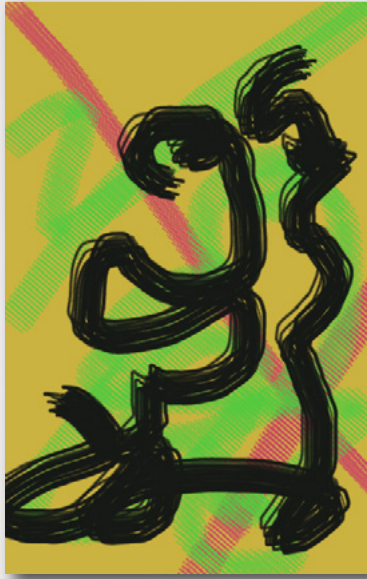
THE END

COVER ART BY
VALENTIN LUSTIG
No money back unless
at COURT ORDER

HOW WELL CAN YO

What effect is created by the brushwork in this painting?

1. The lyrical brushwork recalls East Asian calligraphy.
2. The harsh brush-strokes emphasize masculinity, while the bold colors highlight the artist's politically-charged narrative.
3. The fervent, erratic brush-strokes express the feelings evoked by nature.
4. The languid brushwork is juxtaposed with rigorous, militaristic compositional thrust.



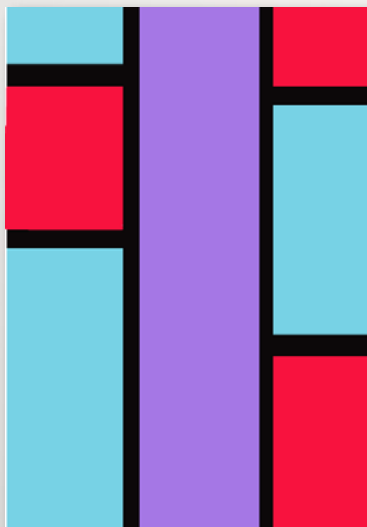
What is the correct title for this work?

1. Audiovisual Media Authority
2. Durisol No. 45
3. Ušumgallu and the Seven Sages
4. Run Like Hell



What is the role of the purple field in this painting?

1. The verticality of the field echoes the position of the viewer, reminding him that he is currently standing in front of a painting.
2. A flat surface, the heavily-saturated purple field represents nothing but itself, signifying an end to illusionism in visual art.
3. The monochromatic purple panel is endlessly deep, a depiction of multidimensional/infinite space.
4. It is John F. Kennedy.



This image is...

1. Playful
2. Unsettling
3. Intimate
4. Hyperbolic



DO YOU APPRECIATE ART?

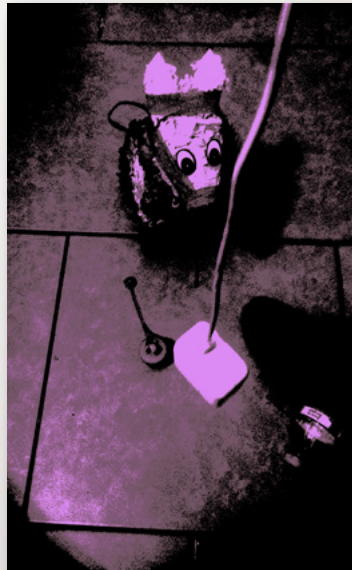
What is the central subject of this painting?

1. The Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996)
2. The act of seeing
3. Nothing. The canvas faces outward, towards us, not to deliver a message, but to display an exemplary quality: independence.
4. Madness



The play between light and dark in this picture...

1. ... is a deliberate evocation of the Renaissance chiaroscuro technique.
2. ... reflects the artist's interest in myth and the primitive unconscious.
3. ... attempts to situate forms in space by means of shifts in value, using light against dark and dark against light to convey volume.
4. ... is a pseudo-painterly conceit that detracts from the fullness and purity of color.



ADD UP YOUR SCORES

6-11: We are humbled. You have an artist's soul—perhaps even an art critic's soul. Your sensitivity to all that is seen and unseen in these works is truly profound. The existence of rare luminaries such as yourself makes the obscene carnival of this material universe almost endurable.

12-20: Though your interpretations are a mite superficial, your impressions are basically sound. We suspect that you are hampered by two equally-misguided instincts: the empty reverence for mere "cleverness" and the meaningless quest for "truth." You must learn to see, simply: to perceive the quidditas and/or haecceitas of each form individually, and in relation to other forms. This is only a matter of practice. For example, do not ask yourself, what is that color? Ask yourself, color (is it)?

21: Your smug, self-satisfied philistinism is appalling. It stinks of anti-intellectualism. In these dark times when cosmopolitan internationalism and the transatlantic liberal tradition is under attack on all sides, your sneering attitude towards the arts consigns you to the same infamous ranks as the thugs who burned down the Library of Alexandria. No doubt you are the sort of subhuman dreg who lurches through galleries screaming, "My ten-year-old could have painted that Basquiat!" It is probable—even certain—that, on more than one occasion, you have enlisted a friend to photograph you in a public sculpture garden while you pretended that various unusually-shaped installations were your penis. You are a disgrace to this magazine and to this country. The editors are placing a temporary hold on all future deliveries of your subscription. If you wish to receive any further issues of Current Affairs, you must send us a five-page typewritten letter describing how much you admire the works of Ellsworth Kelly.

22-24: We have high hopes for you. Though your answers are almost universally incorrect, we are convinced that the fault is not in your eye, but simply in your education. A thorough background in both classical and contemporary art is necessary to understand the thematic complexity and self-referential wit of these pieces. Our personal feeling is that there is no better way to begin to understand modern art than by owning a piece of it yourself. For a mere \$84.2 million, you can purchase a Barnett Newman for your very own living room. Watch your friends' faces when you tell them how much you paid for it, and you will begin to understand the ineffable awe that a truly majestic work of art can inspire.

MEAN OLD WORLD

It is a matter of common knowledge that the world is full of bastards, and that these bastards have made it their mission to get you down. Nobody knows from whence these bastards sprung, but spring they did, and here we are trapped with them on this desolate orb. As the man sang, it is a mean old world to live in by yourself. You are beset on all sides by treachery and predation. Diseases would like to kill you, aspiring dictators would like to oppress you, and loan companies would like you to pay them. Each day comes bearing its misfortunes: you will burn a piece of toast, someone will make a patronizing remark about your intellect, then you will fall in a sewage puddle. Perhaps a case of mistaken identity will land you in prison, or your hat will blow away and be shredded by a jet engine. One never knows how one's circumstances may have changed by the time one goes to bed. Uncertainty and calamity: these are among the most common and predictable elements of human life. But that, dear reader, is why you subscribe. You cannot be assured of many things, but you can be assured that this is your magazine. You do not know whether it will arrive on time, or whether it will contain an opinion you find horrifying. But you do know that there will always be a Current Affairs, and that Current Affairs will always be with You against the Bastards. We are your lawyer, architect, and confidante. We will sleep beneath your pillow, so that you can roll us up and beat an intruder with us should the necessity arise. We will come on the subway with you, and stick our tongue out at manspreaders. We will join you for a pint at the pub, and you can use us as a coaster or pretend to be reading us to avoid being hassled by nitwits. Take us to church and hide us in an oversized hymnal, so that you can enjoy our sensible topical commentary rather than having to endure the interminable blather of some wearisome vicar. Shove us in the faces of your attackers, wave us around when the police ask you for identification. Use us, abuse us. We are your very own glossy bimonthly Giving Tree, and our pages are yours to befoul.

HOW TO DETERMINE WHICH HALF OF A MARRIED COUPLE GETS TO READ CURRENT AFFAIRS FIRST

It is commonly assumed that Current Affairs can only do good in the world, that it would be inconceivable for anything to be worse off for having had more Current Affairs. Reader, how we wish that this were so. How zealously we strive to make it so. And yet: it is not so. For there is one way in which Current Affairs has been injurious to the public. It is this: when two married persons share a single subscription, the resulting tension over who gets to read the magazine first can be fierce and intractable. It is said that Current Affairs has broken families apart. This is only too plausible. The symptoms of Current Affairs withdrawal have been known to drive human beings to mad and depraved acts. There is, of course, a simple solution for those married couples who spar over CA reading privileges: dual subscriptions, his and hers (or whatever the applicable pair of possessive pronouns happens to be). But we realize that Current Affairs is The Magazine Of The Working Class, and that it is not always possible to fritter away one's income on copies of our magazine, attractive and informative as it may be. Sometimes the family budget must make room for other indulgences, such as the feeding and clothing of the offspring, or paying for antidepressants and orthodontic work for the horses. For the proletarian couple, then, we offer an alternative: a simple points system, in which each person is weighed according to their desert, and the worthiest granted a right of first perusal.

Add points for the following:

2 points to whoever has the longest name (first and last only)
5 points if one person is pregnant
1 point for being from a Southern state
5 additional points if the state is Louisiana
1 point for being the most recent member of the couple to personally correspond with the editor of Current Affairs

2 points for being a vegetarian
3 points if you haven't read The New York Times in over a week
5 points if you have never read The Economist
1 point if you can name six counties in eastern Kentucky
1 point to whoever most recently made a meal for the other
2 points for a clean driving record
2 points for having large outstanding student loans

Deduct points as follows:

-1 point if a person has worn a bowtie in the last six months
-4 points for being a lawyer
-5 points for being a poet (professional or amateur)
-2 points if a person commonly goes by their initials
-2 points if a person has ever received an award for their debating skill
-1 point for majoring in economics

-5 points if you have ever described yourself as a "fiscal conservative"
-1 point if you have ever voted third-party in a swing state
-1 point if Christmas makes you grumpy
-2 points for attending an Ivy League institution as an undergraduate
-3 points if you currently hold political office
-1 point if you do not own any clothing made of velvet

THE BRIBES WE CAN OFFER THE PRESIDENT

The U.S. State Department recently disclosed a full list of the gifts given by the Saudi Arabian government to Donald Trump during the president's May visit. The list includes approximately 80 items, of varying levels of absurdity. Many are luxurious pieces of clothing, including "purple wool robe with white tiger fur lining," "traditional Saudi Arabian chiffon yellow dress with gold beading," and "five cashmere headscarves with various patterns," plus a "book about traditional Saudi Arabian costume" so that Trump could ensure he was wearing his cashmere headscarves in accordance with proper custom. Other notable gifts included "two sets of three-piece rose oil perfume in custom carved wooden boxes," a "dagger made of pure silver with mother of pearl sheath and various designs," and an "artwork featuring who had picture of president Trump." And we confess ourselves especially intrigued by "three painted boxes filled with various small trinkets and children's books."

But of all the various baubles bestowed on the U.S. president by the Saudi regime, one captured our attention above all others: item #75, "bronze dugong model." Regular readers know that Current Affairs, as the publishing conglomerate that



once spawned the highly successful Manatee Facts Podcast, has the softest of soft spots for all members of the trichechidae family. We are a sucker for a sea cow. Predictably, news that President Trump had been given a Bronze Dugong Model excited an implacable envy in us. What we wouldn't do for such a thing. A bronze dugong model would go perfectly on the mantelpiece of the Current Affairs smoking room. Why should Donald J. Trump be endowed with such a treasure rather than us, when the president is a man who would hardly know a manatee if it swam up and gently nibbled his rear end?

The depth of our jealous lust has been shameful. Upon reflection, we realized something disquieting about our own ethical standards. We like to think of ourselves as an upright periodical, an incorruptible gang of muckrakers who cannot be bought off with shiny gewgaws. This, however, is false. Give us a bronze dugong model, and we, too, would overlook the gross human rights abuses committed by your despotic government. Who are we to judge the president, when we, too, could hardly remain high-minded when King Salman dangled his metallic manatees in front of us?

Fortunately for the public, the Saudi government has not yet tried to bribe Current Affairs with tiger-fur dresses and sculpted marine life. But we have realized something: the secret to getting Trump to do one's bidding may be to offer him useless frilly tchotchkes. If Saudi Arabia can conduct its diplomacy this way, so can we. Therefore: in exchange for Trump's renouncing the U.S.'s partnership with the Saudi regime, and opposing its pattern of beheading and imprisoning those who question it, we are prepared to offer generous counter-bribes of our own. These include an unlimited number of complimentary subscriptions, a set of gold-plated Current Affairs cufflinks, a copy of our new paperback essay collection The Current Affairs Mindset, and a personal tour of our offices to be conducted by the editor during one of his occasional bouts of lucidity. We hope that the President will realize that these are treasures of far greater value than any gilded piece of frippery the Saudi royal family may care to throw at him.

At the very least, we hope he will consider a trade for the dugong.

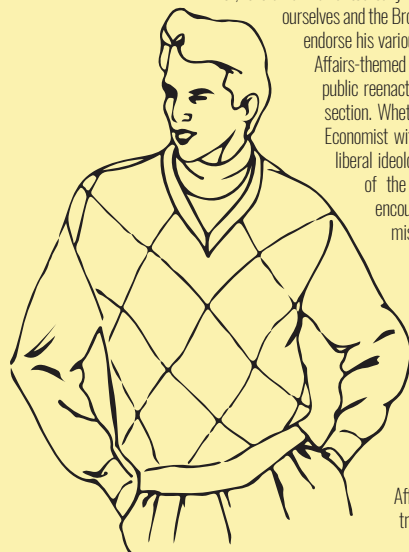
“& NOVEMBER?”

The more hawkeyed members of the Current Affairs readership will have noted a peculiarity in the temporal labeling of this most recent edition of our periodical. While we are a bimonthly publication, distributed once every sixty days (or whenever the editor manages to expel himself from his latest beignet-and-opium-fueled delirious stupor), the new edition's cover text appears to suggest that we have transmogrified ourselves into a Quarterly. "Sept./Oct./Nov." it says, rather than "Sept./Oct." Reader, this results from neither an error by the typography urchin nor a transformation of our publication schedule. Instead, it is simply an effort to trick bookshops into keeping our magazine on their shelves for longer. We are, you see, notoriously late in our deliveries (See "On Tardiness," July/Aug. 2017). This means that by the time fresh editions arrive upon the unloading dock of your local Barnes & Noble, the dates on the cover have usually expired. Our magazine is therefore no longer as "current" as the name implies, and can be thrown away. By fiddling with the dates, however, we can stay true to our distinguished moniker and keep the stockroom agents from discarding us prematurely. Subscribers need not worry: six editions will still be printed every year, and will eventually arrive in mailboxes. Our fiendish plot against the lobbying cartel otherwise known as Big Bookstore will have no repercussions of any consequence for our loyal and generous readership.

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS BRO

You have seen him at the omnibus stop or the velodrome. He haunts the dormitories and the quadrangle, the malt shop and the discotheque. In dress, he is always the same: the boat shoes, the Oakley sunglasses, the board shorts, the pastel pink sweatshirt. And, of course, the copy of Current Affairs carried under his arm. He is The Current Affairs Bro, that most American and most pestilential of creatures. Whether he is sidling up to you at a party wielding the latest issue, asking "Yo, did you see that sick new essay on the philosophical foundations of liberal tolerance?" or standing amidst a gaggle of his brothers, mooning lustily over the latest centerfold and scandalizing elderly passersby, he is always the same: boorish, sexually indecorous, and incapable of opining on any topic beyond the excellence of Current Affairs and the political necessity of revolutionary socialism. He is a menace, and not the charming kind. Reader, we have been asked repeatedly to denounce the Current Affairs Bro. He is worming his way into your communities, and sullyng our reputable name. And if there is one thing we will not stand for, it is an unwarranted sullyng. We must put distance between

ourselves and the Bro, lest the general public assume we endorse his various offenses, his aggressive Current Affairs-themed pickup lines and his alcohol-fueled public reenactments of our Letters To The Editor section. Whether he is on Twitter, deluging The Economist with sexist comments about its neoliberal ideological assumptions, or on the floor of the Democratic National Convention encouraging people to subscribe using misogynistic euphemisms, the Bro's behavior must be ended before our magazine is considered indistinguishable from a fraternity house or a sex crime. Thus: we hereby damn the Current Affairs Bro. He may "subscribe," but he is in no way a Subscriber. What he does, he does in his own name. Let the public never conclude that Current Affairs endorses the existence of patriarchy or the boat shoe.



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ARTWORK

"When You Need Us," "Flamingo" (p. 2, 15) — Mike Freiheit

"Jeremy Corbyn" (p. 8-9) — Naomi Ushiyama

"The End of Death" (p. 16) — Kevin Alvir

"Bubbles," "Sex Positions" (p. 19, 58) — Chris Matthews

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"The Dying Reef" (p. 52-53) — C.M. Duffy

"Return to the Stork" (p. 54) — Vanessa A. Bee

JEREMY

You are the Labour Party's chief media strategist. You have a problem. Nobody can agree what sort of clothes Jeremy Corbyn ought to wear to optimize his electability. Should he be himself and wear the old beige jumper his mum knitted him in 1985? Should he make some kind of modest attempt to look like the leader of a major political party, with, like, a suit or something? Or should he appeal to millennials with a branded T-shirt and a pair of designer jeans? It's your job to find the outfit that will reverse the party's electoral fortunes! Good luck.



CORBYN

DRESS HIM FOR SUCCESS



ARE THE
ANTI FA
ESPECIALLY USEFUL?

PROBABLY
NOT

BUT LET'S SEE

Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, Melville House, 288pp, \$16.99

DON'T INTEND TO SOUND PREACHY (I'M DEFINITELY going to sound preachy), but I have been thinking lately about how few of the necessary things also happen to be the easy things. This is true in life generally, but especially in politics. The process of trying to improve the world is tedious and thankless. Much of it's not very romantic. And it's important to remember that when we assess the question of what actions to take. We're always going to have a bias toward the easy things, the things that provide quick gratification, rather than the most effective things.

Adolph Reed, Jr. suggests that a kind of "cargo cult" has arisen on the left, where activists do things that *look* like political success, but aren't actually furthering left goals. The cargo cult comparison is illuminating: famously, certain islanders in the South Pacific noticed that American and Japanese planes landed on airstrips and brought supplies. The islanders then built makeshift airstrips, even wearing wooden headphones and sitting in improvised "control towers," thinking that this would cause cargo to arrive. It didn't, of course. They had replicated the *appearance* of an airport without actually creating an airport, and confused "what it looks like air traffic controllers are doing" (i.e. sitting in a tower with objects on their ears making noises) with "what they are actually doing" (i.e. directing flights).

Reed says left politics can operate similarly. Protests, for example, are supposed to be calculated to create specific kinds of political pressure, and are deployed strategically. But over time, it has come to seem as if protests are just "the thing you do if you want change." We hold signs because we know that activists hold signs, just as the islanders built towers because they knew that airports had towers, but there's something missing: a theory of how the action we're taking is going to bring about the result we seek. Freddie deBoer, in *Current Affairs*, suggested that this is because people are less and less able to conceive of serious political change as a real possibility, and have increasingly retreated to the areas where they know victories are possible, even if those victories are merely symbolic. Hence racial justice campaigns revolve around things like making the Oscars more diverse, or pulling down Confederate statues, rather than solving health and wealth disparities between black and white people. The left, deBoer says, is like the drunk who looks for his keys under the streetlamp because "that's where the light is." Problems that seem too intractable are set aside, even though they are far more important.

This, deBoer says, is why the left pays a disproportionate amount of attention to people like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos. And the result is dangerous, because it leads to an erroneous assessment of how politically useful it is to violently try to stop those people:

"Incidents like the black bloc protests at Berkeley or the punching of Richard Spencer grant people license to overestimate the current potential of violent resistance. Hey, Spencer got punched; never mind that the Trump administration reinstituted the global gag rule on abortion the next day. Hey, Milo's talk got canceled; never mind that the relentless effort to deport thousands, a bipartisan effort for which the Obama administration deserves considerable blame, went on without a hitch. Better to make yet another meme out of Spencer getting hit than to

attempt to confront the full horror of our current predicament."

I hesitate to fully endorse Reed and deBoer's cynicism about contemporary left politics. But I do think the question they raise must always be borne in mind: are actions being taken because they are the most useful, or because they are the most satisfying? It's an issue that kept coming back to me as I read Mark Bray's *Antifa: The Antifascist Handbook*, which is, among other things, an unapologetic defense of street-fighting as a legitimate and important form of left activism.

The Antifa (a contraction of "anti-fascist") have been given a good amount of attention in the press over the last year, after successfully preventing Yiannopoulos from speaking at Berkeley in February, and clashing with white nationalists in Charlottesville in July. They are groups of left-wing protesters who see themselves as being in a struggle against fascism, and are more militant in their disposition than other activists. One thing Bray's book makes clear is that, despite press attempts to depict Antifa as some kind of organized and uniform group, the word more accurately describes a tendency, characterized by a strong belief in confronting and eliminating the far right "by any means necessary." Those means aren't necessarily violent ones, but the Antifa philosophy lacks any principled commitment to nonviolence. According to Bray, a core difference between Antifa and mainstream progressivism is that Antifa is "illiberal," i.e. it rejects the idea of universal human rights, because "universal" implies that even fascists should have their rights respected. They do not accept the core liberal maxim "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend your right to say it." Given the legacy of Auschwitz, the Antifa hold, there is no reason to allow Nazis the right to say anything at all.

Bray's book is the sort often described as a "timely intervention in the discourse." It is, as Bray tells us multiple times, the "most comprehensive in any language" of any guide to Antifa, and it's the best available means of understanding how they see themselves. Bray is a historian at Dartmouth, but the book makes no effort at academic neutrality. Bray admits it is an "unabashedly partisan call to arms" against a "resurgent Far Right," and half the proceeds of its sale go to an Antifa group. The first part of *Antifa* is a history of popular efforts to counter the far right. But the latter half is, as the subtitle says, a handbook, including intelligent responses to common criticisms of Antifa.

THE HISTORICAL PORTION OF THE BOOK IS A CHRONICLE of heroic acts of community self-defense from the 1920s to the present. Bray tells us of the efforts to confront Oswald Moseley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) both before the war, in the so-called "Battle of Cable Street," and afterwards, when a group of anti-fascist Jewish ex-service members formed the "43 Group" to break up fascist meetings. We learn about the black youths in France during the 1980s who protected their neighborhoods from assault by racist gangs, and the anti-racist skinhead punks who took on their neo-Nazi counterparts. Bray wants to persuade readers that these groups, though their contexts differed, should be seen as part of a unified project: a long effort by courageous members of the left to take direct action against racism. And today's Antifa continue in that tradition, fighting Nazis in Charlottesville just as British Jews fought BUF members in Cable Street in 1936.

Bray also wants to defend the “illiberal” philosophy of Antifa, the one that embraces physically shutting down far-right activity, through violence if necessary, and has little sympathy for criticisms grounded in “free speech.” The Antifa argument is that democratic political institutions can’t be entrusted to keep people safe from fascism; after all, Mussolini and Hitler came to power through legal means. “Fascism cannot be defeated through speech,” Bray has said. The democratic illusion is that fascism can be eliminated through a “marketplace of ideas,” where we all calmly and rationally put forth our various perspectives and the best one triumphs. This is not how politics work, however:

“First, [...] anti-fascists make a historical argument based on the accurate observation that “rational debate” and the institutions of government have failed to consistently halt the rise of fascism. Given that fact, they argue that the only hope to prevent a sequel is to physically prevent any potential fascist advance. Second, they point to the many successful examples of militant anti-fascism shutting down or severely hampering far-right organizing since the end of World War II. Third, fascist violence often necessitates self-defense...”

THIS EMPHASIS ON THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF “rational debate” and the uselessness of “talking to fascists” is pervasive on the left. But I think it’s based on a mistake: it appears to conclude that because democratic institutions did not prevent the rise of fascism during the 1920s and 30s, it is futile to attempt to prevent the rise of fascism using democratic institutions. That’s not necessarily the case, though: Bray’s own discussion of the history of prewar Germany shows that one of the core reasons the Nazis came to power was that the left was divided by bitter sectarian infighting, with the hardcore communists dismissing the socialists as “social fascists” who were no better than Hitler. The Nazis never commanded an electoral majority, and it may have been a failure of left political organizing (rather than a failure to crack enough Brownshirt skulls) that enabled the catastrophe of Hitler’s victory. And if that *was* the primary reason, then we should be very worried indeed about Antifa. Bray writes that “Anti-fascism is really in many ways the antithesis of mass movement building” because it must call out “fascist entryism on the left.” Many Antifa members are anarchists who are skeptical of both large-scale organizations and electoral politics. If it turns out that large-scale organizations and electoral politics are an important part of keeping the right out of power (as I suspect they are), the Antifa philosophy

may not be of much help. Bray also admits that because Antifa are often organized in response to particular far right groups, they tend to fizzle without ever coalescing into a broader left political movement, but says that “the increasing portability of the militant antifa model was perhaps far more important than the longevity of specific organizations.”

In fact, questions about the propriety of Antifa’s stances on free speech and violence may be less important than its limited usefulness as a political force. Bray insists throughout *Antifa* that these groups are about more than just street-fighting with racists, that this is simply a

small part of a larger project to abolish capitalism, racial/gender oppression, and all forms of hierarchy. But when Bray actually lists the other things Antifa members do, the second listed thing always seems to be “squatting,” and the conversation always quickly comes back to Nazi-punching. For instance, here Bray claims that German anti-fascists were trying to forge an entire



There’s always something vaguely disconcerting about people in black masks wielding sticks, no matter which side they’re on.

new kind of non-hierarchical world, but the key example he cites is... dressing up in masks and throwing Molotov cocktails:

“[F]undamentally, German autonomous politics were about developing prefigurative forms of non-hierarchical self-management, which then forged the world they sought to create through unmediated direct action. That direct action took a number of forms, but one of the most spectacular was the tactic known as the black bloc, where Autonomes dressed in black with their faces covered by motorcycle helmets, balaclavas, or other masks to create a uniform, anonymous mass of revolutionaries prepared to carry out militant actions, sometimes involving weapons such as flagpoles, clubs, projectiles, and Molotov cocktails.”

But this might still be justified, if there were reason to believe that Antifa were seriously dedicated to neutralizing the political threat of the far right. Bray says that those who think Antifa’s methods are ineffective do not understand how political organizing works: if you shut down the Nazis’ meetings, they can’t effectively build a force. The theory, he says, is that Antifa are trying to raise the social costs of being a racist to the point where nobody wants to be one anymore. And he says that this is precisely what has happened before: once going to a punk show wearing a swastika guaranteed a punch to the jaw, people swiftly stopped doing it.

This is pretty convincing, actually. But Bray, like other Antifa sympathizers, waves away important evidence that the theory doesn’t always work. The Battle of Cable Street in 1936, for instance, was romantic but actually didn’t help the anti-fascist cause. As Daniel Tilles writes in *History Today*:

“Far from signalling the demise of fascism in the East End, or bringing respite to its Jewish victims, Cable Street had quite the opposite effect. Over the following months the BUF was able to convert defeat on the day into longer-term success and to justify a further radicalisation of its anti-Jewish campaign... In the week after Cable Street the BUF ‘conducted the most successful series of meetings since the beginning of the movement’, attracting crowds of thousands and little opposition. [A government report concluded that] ‘the alleged Fascist defeat is in reality a Fascist advance.’ When such incidents took place the party was able with some success to portray itself as a victim. It claimed that its efforts to exercise free speech legally, through organised meetings and police-approved processions, were being systematically suppressed by left-wing extremists.”

BRAY DOESN'T DENY THIS. INSTEAD, he says “the fact that the Battle of Cable Street helped fascist recruitment, triggered fascist violence, and was viewed negatively by Jewish community leadership and the majority of the British public does not prove that it was a strategic error.” This is because “sometimes self-determination needs to be prioritized over winning a popular contest that is designed for you to lose.” Thus anti-fascist street-fighting is “strategically” sound even if it literally causes the further growth of a fascist movement, alienating the public and causing more people to be victimized by racists. The remark about the contest being “designed to lose” is actually quite telling: there’s a certain desperation to the Antifa, a belief that liberal democracy is doomed, and the best you can hope for is to land a few punches on a Nazi before fascism inevitably devours the world.

It’s important to understand *why* the Battle of Cable Street was good for the fascists. It allowed them to pose as victims, and to suggest that all they wanted to do was exercise their right to free speech. Fascists love attempted repression for this reason: it makes it far easier for them to appeal to the general public, who may be repulsed by totalitarian politics but sympathetic to the argument that people should get to speak without being punched. Bray does not believe that happens, saying that “the vast majority of those who would be significantly swayed by fascist claims to victimhood would respond positively to such an appeal under any pretense.” But I think this is empirically false: ask the public how sympathetic they are to the Nazi claim that they are the victims of Jewish conspiracy, versus how sympathetic they would be if a Nazi was pelted with rocks

after asking to be afforded the same right to speak as everybody else. If a member of the far right is beaten up for trying to talk, they will have a far more publicly persuasive claim of victimhood than if they are *not* beaten up for trying to talk.

One of the major critiques of the illiberal Antifa perspective is that in excluding “fascists” from the discourse, it sets itself up to be incredibly repressive, because “fascist” is such a vague word that it could mean any one of a number of things. This is often phrased as “How do you decide who the fascists are?” It may be easy when they’re wearing swastikas, but if they’re not, what qualifies? Bray acknowledges that fascism is a slippery term, and settles on a scholar’s definition of it as “a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity.” But he says that in practice, the question doesn’t end up mattering very much. It’s a query, he says, made by liberal pundits who “don’t know what they’re talking about.” In practice, anti-fascists haven’t expanded to include a wider and wider range of targets. In fact, whenever the far right has been neutralized and is no longer literally marching in the streets, the anti-fascists have packed up and gone home. (This is, in fact, one of the problems with them!)

The strange thing is, though, that even as Bray claims anti-fascists are pretty good at drawing distinctions, his own analysis makes it unclear whether “fascism” means just “people who are openly neo-Nazi” or also includes ordinary conservatives and Trump supporters. Indeed, Bray says that “anti-fascism is an illiberal politics of social revolutionism applied to fighting the Far Right, not only literal fascists.” And this does seem to include pretty much anyone who voted for the President. He cites Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter as part of the fascist problem, and says that “everyday fascists are the ardent Trump supporters who ‘tell it like it is’ by actively trying to dismantle the taboos against oppression.” He quotes an assessment that “all major political parties in France manifested fascistic traits” with Marine Le Pen’s Front National being almost a distraction.

Worse, it’s not clear, on the Antifa philosophy, what limits there are on violence once an individual has been declared a fascist. Bray says one must “crush any collective manifestations of their fascistic aspirations,” including “making it a nightmare for campus groups and administrators to have [far right] speakers on campus.” That includes the use of violence:

“Fascist violence often necessitates self-defense—

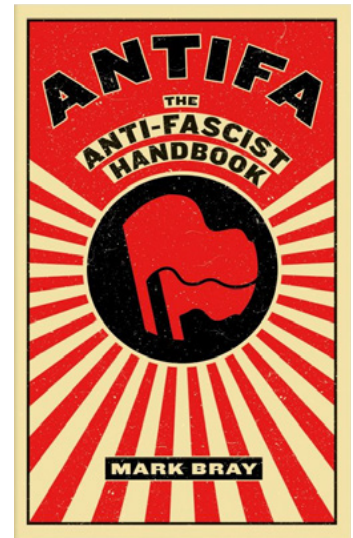
OUR REVIEW OF WHAT HAPPENED

Reader, we can’t do it. We were begged. “But it is an extremely important book,” they said. “Regardless of what you think, when a major party candidate gives their candid perspective on an important election, it is worth at least writing a review.” And we can’t argue with them. They are right. Nevertheless: it is impossible. We cannot review Hillary Clinton’s *What Happened*, because we would have to read Hillary Clinton’s *What Happened*, and this is simply impossible. It is too much to inflict on any member of our writing staff. There must be a boundary to the cruelties one can be forced to endure for the sake of Quality Content.

We have said all we needed to say about the 2016 election, and then some. Those readers interested in our analysis of it can look up the articles “Unless The Democrats Run Sanders, A Trump Nomination Means A Trump Presidency” (Feb. 23, 2016), “Nominating A Candidate Under Active FBI Investigation Is An Incredibly Risky Gamble” (Mar. 5, 2016), and “The Democrats Are Making A Suicidal Mistake” (May 26, 2016). We feel that these just about cover it, and that a review of a failed politician’s enumerated list of gripes will add little to the aforementioned analysis.

Nevertheless, to those that truly crave our assessment, who will feel their subscription dollars have been ill-spent without the definitive Current Affairs take on *What Happened*, we present the following review, which serves as our full and final comment on the book: “Probably not very good, and almost certainly not helpful.”

“Antifa represent a politics of hopelessness that can’t actually lead anywhere...”



although anti-fascists challenge conventional interpretations of self-defense grounded in individualistic personal ethics by legitimating offensive tactics in order to forestall the potential need for literal self-defense down the line. In other words, anti-fascists don't wait for a fascist threat to become violent before acting to shut it down, physically if necessary."

Note that while Bray has said Antifa violence is “self-defense,” the term is being given an elastic definition. “Defensive” violence can actually include “offensive tactics” if such tactics are seen as necessary to avoid having to defend one’s self in the future. (This is, by the way, the exact justification used by the Bush Administration to justify invading Iraq.) When you put together the mushy definition of fascist with the mushy definition of violence, it’s unclear whether or not Bray believes that one can simply punch any Trump supporter in the head, on the grounds that support for Trump is “everyday fascism,” and fascism is an inherent threat to safety that justifies preemptive violence. If Bray *isn’t* justifying punching unarmed Trump supporters, he certainly hasn’t said how that would be inconsistent with the philosophy he endorses.

ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES, ONE CAN ONLY IMAGINE what a catastrophe it would be for activists to follow the tenets of the *Antifa* handbook. Bray says the commitment of university campuses to eliminating racism is “entirely hollow if the very same institutions also provide space for groups that not only deny the humanity of those populations, but are actively organizing movements to physically deprive them of their existence.” That would seem to justify banning the campus Republican club, since America’s foreign wars are definitely fueled by dehumanization and definitely (what a peculiar euphemism this is) physically deprive people of their existence. Bray advocates confronting the everyday fascists head on, “shaming them for their oppressive beliefs,” to “increase the social cost of oppressive behavior to such a point that those who promote it see no option but to recede into hiding.” This is useful because “we may not always be able to change someone’s beliefs, but we sure as hell can make it politically, socially, economically, and sometimes physically costly to articulate them.” So instead of trying to talk to the other side, the best thing you can do is make their lives so unpleasant that they conceal their true thoughts.

Perhaps that’s a useful political strategy, but I somehow doubt it. Instead, it seems to me like it will lead to (1) incredible amounts of social hostility as people attempt to make it more and more “costly” to be oppressive, and (2) the illusion of success without the reality, as Trump supporters refuse to be open about their beliefs but continue to hold them nevertheless. The Antifa approach to persuasion seems, like the rest of the philosophy, to not really care about winning, but rather about doing things that feel satisfying.

There’s no political program in the *Antifa* handbook, no description of a specific set of plausible objectives, beyond huge vague goals like the elimination of all oppression worldwide, and, of course, making it socially toxic to be a Nazi/fascist/Republican. *Antifa* is a history of left-wing street violence, and a set of justifications for it, but that seems to be all there is to this kind of politics. You’ll learn why fascists don’t deserve free speech. But you won’t get a sense of how to accomplish anything beyond the cracking of skulls.

I should mention here that I think the violence inflicted by the right is far more significant than that inflicted by the left. One strange thing about media coverage of Charlottesville is that the Antifa, who defended clergy members against attack by white supremacists, were the ones condemned, when a black man was brutally beaten and a peaceful leftist protester was murdered with a car. And violence from Antifa members, which in practice often *is* self-defensive, pales next to violence committed by hate groups, police, and the American military. It’s important, if one genuinely does care about violence, to keep the focus proportionate. If one is honest and consistent, Antifa should barely even register on the scale.

But the tendency is worth discussing, and Bray’s book is worth reviewing, less because of the violence/speech debates than because Antifa represent a politics of hopelessness that needs to be abandoned. Because the left is out of power electorally, because the Democratic Party is not an effective exponent of the progressive cause and third parties are doomed, Nazi-punching is the only thing left. In a time when the conventional political system offers so little promise, Antifa is at least *something*, and it has the right enemies. But Mark Bray’s *Antifa*, despite its useful history of efforts to beat back the far right in the streets, confirms that there is nowhere for this political tendency to go once the skinheads have gone home. ❖

*Negative
Public Image?*

*Severe Human
Rights Violations?*

*Incredible
Abuses Of
Power?*

*Poison
Drinking
Water?*

"ONE COAT

IS

ALL

IT TAKES!"

Pinky's
Pink Washing Services

NEW!



COULD DEATH BE A BAD THING?

THE MORAL NECESSITY OF IMMORTALITY

by Nathan J. Robinson



"But where is the ship actually headed?" I managed to ask, deliriously. "Do we know?"

"Oh yes. It is on a fixed trajectory straight towards the center of the nearest large star."

"But if the ship sails into a star, won't it instantly be incinerated?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely. In a nanosecond!"

"Why on earth are we heading into it then?"

"We have always been heading for it. For the entire history of this ship, this has been its destination."

"Can we change the ship's direction?"

"It is unlikely."

"But do you know for sure?"

"No."

"Is anybody trying to navigate the ship onto a different course?"

"Oh, no. That would be tampering with nature. The ship's trajectory is what gives its journey meaning. We define ourselves as *The Ship On Course For Collision With A Star*. If we were not to collide with the star, we would no longer be that ship. Do you see?"

I did not see at all.

MY POSITION ON DEATH IS CONTROVERSIAL: I am against it. Most people I know are in favor of it. Not me. I think death is a thoroughly bad thing, and I oppose it entirely. What's more, I can't understand why nearly everyone else seems to disagree.

Oh, they say they agree that death is a bad thing. But they don't. Not really. When you press them, most people think death is a natural part of the life cycle, one we must all resign ourselves to. I do not subscribe to this belief. I think it is perverse. There seems nothing "natural" about death to me. Living is what seems natural.

What fascinates me is the difference between what people insist they believe about death and what they actually believe. When I say that I find death bad, and I am opposed to it, people think I am saying something incredibly obvious and trivial. But when I discuss the implications of this, namely that life extension research would be a thoroughly good thing, it turns out that it *isn't* quite so obvious and undisputed that death is bad. In fact, many people hold the extreme position that "without death, life has no meaning." They believe that is not only an unavoidable fact of human existence, but that it actually confers a benefit on us, because long lives would somehow be unnatural or unbearable. In fact, when I actually discuss it with people, it ends up proving extremely difficult to convince people of the proposition that supposedly everyone already believes, namely that death is bad.

I have never wanted to die. And I have never wanted any of my friends or relations to die. (Nor have I even wanted my nemeses to die.) So long as I am in good health, as I hope to be, I can't see that situation ever changing. And yet I am consistently told that I *must* die. That's because death is inevitable and necessary, and without it life would not be life. And when I ask why more people don't see death as something that ought to be eliminated, people either say this is impossible (even though we do not know that) or that doing so would be going against nature (even though we go against nature constantly, and the distinction between the "natural" and the "unnatural" is an arbitrary construct).

From my perspective, believing that death is bad, life extension research seems not only *good* but *morally necessary*. That's because my view on death stems from my view on human freedom gener-

ally: people should get to decide for themselves how their lives will go. Death, presuming a person doesn't *want* to die, is an abridgment of a person's capacity to choose the direction of their life for themselves. Thus death is an abridgment of human freedom, and getting rid of as much of it as possible should be part of our broader effort to make people freer and freer from the restrictions on their autonomy imposed by both nature and other people. I believe that people should get to live as they please. That means I believe they shouldn't have to die, not if they don't want to.

But life extension research has never been a particularly compelling social priority. Its public proponents are limited to a few cranks like Aubrey de Grey of the Methuselah Foundation, who seems intent on undermining his public credibility by sporting the beard of a biblical prophet. "Life extension" isn't what we think about when we think about medical research; we don't think about preventing "death" but about preventing specific diseases that cause death.

I think we would do well to consider "death" as a problem in and of itself, however. Yes, people die from cancer, heart attacks, car accidents, falling pianos, old age, and snakebites, and those things are in no way the same. But something is gained by seeing death as a problem in and of itself: we begin to recognize the common principle, which is that we are trying to free people of being involuntarily deprived of their ability to choose how to live. What every cause of death has in common (with the possible, though highly debatable, exception of suicide) is that nature or another human being has stolen a person's free choice over their destiny.

That's why I think death is an urgent problem in *every* form. And I don't believe it gets much better if a person gets to live to an old age. I find it terribly sad that perfectly lucid elderly people are forced to begin to come to terms with the fact that, regardless of how they feel about it, they will soon be killed. "Killed" seems the wrong word, because it implies an intentional actor, but either way the experience is the same for the person who must die. Nobody should ever have to be told "I'm sorry, regardless of how you feel about it, your life will soon be taken from you." We live in a world where everyone is told that. We should do everything we can to change that.

ONE REASON I'M SO ANTI-DEATH IS THAT I THINK life is such a truly extraordinary thing. I love life; it is everything. It is the precondition for every single other thing that a person can have or do. To take it from them, or allow it to be taken from them, is to deprive them of *everything they have*. It is the ultimate crime, which is why we punish it so highly. But if we value life, we should be trying to give people as much of it as possible.

Of course, no matter how much we increase the *capacity* to live, people might still choose to end their lives. Nobody should be forced to live, just as nobody should be forced to die. But the point is that there ought to be a choice; a moment's empathy should convince us that one of the most horrible positions to be in is that of the person who wants nothing more than to live but knows they are about to die. When we talk about "ending death" we are not so much referring to an *infinite* lifespan as to a "choice" of lifespan; the freedom to decide just how long one's life should be, and a commitment to constantly expanding the range of choices so that people can live as long as they feel they would like to live. Person-

ally, I would not like to live forever. Instead, I would like to live for as long as it takes me to complete all of the projects I would like to do, and have all the experiences I would like to have. That will take a long time. Probably several thousand years. But currently, it is not an available option.

It goes without saying that it is only worth extending lives if we are simultaneously maintaining the quality of life. A long life spent in agony or in a state of mental decay may not be worth living. If we are to decide between keeping lifespans as they are and greatly improving the quality of life people have within those spans, or increasing lifespans without improving quality (or decreasing average quality), quantity will obviously not be the top priority. Yet it remains true that, conditional on being able to give people the sort of lives they would actually enjoy, longer possible lives are always better. Nobody will be made to choose a longer life, but respecting individual desires means making sure they actually have the choice.

When I have presented my position on life extension to people, I have been shocked at just how willing people are to endorse depriving others of life. Some people think that even if research into immortality seemed promising, we should not pursue it, because “death is what gives meaning to life.” Life is defined by the fact that there is death at the end, and if death were not there, neither would meaning be. I find that position shocking, because

it amounts to being willing to force *other* people to die in order to make sure everyone follows *your* conception of what gives meaning to life. When I hear the sentence “death gives meaning to life,” I feel as if I have found myself in the village of a suicide cult, who chant “death gives meaning to life” over and over as they poison me. Why should your perverse conception of meaning be everybody else’s?

Personally, I believe that people give meaning to their own lives. If someone believes that only death can give meaning to life, then they can opt to die. But it seems to me like the consensus position should be in favor of autonomy: people should get to decide how their lives will have meaning, which means that people should get to live a long time if they so choose. That means that *everybody* should support life extension, because even if you believe that “death gives meaning to life,” you should still support increasing the ability for people who do not share your personal conception of meaning to extend their own lives.

The “naturalization” of death, another common argument, simply seems to me to be an error. Death is no more “natural” than salmonella, the New York subway system, or cottage cheese. Distinctions between that which is “natural” and that which is “unnatural” always seem to me to be based on mere assertion, rather than any actual meaningful principled difference. Death exists, we know that. But if life extension technology existed, it would be no less natural than death, because existence is existence.

Some in the pro-death crowd carefully dance around the issue with poetic phrases about how we should humbly accept our essential mortality. “Radical life extension smacks of an intemperate claim to have unlocked the fundamental mystery of life,” said Roger Cohen of *The New York Times*. But Roger should say what he means. In practice, what he means is that given a choice between massive quantities of death and zero death you would take the former, because of some nonsense poetry about temperance. I find this position a bloodthirsty kind of madness, and I resent Roger Cohen for wanting me to die.

DEATH: Pro and Con

As we have established, death is controversial. But it has its advantages. Here, we attempt a balanced consideration of its benefits and drawbacks.

FOR	AGAINST
Life is a vale of tears	Death might not be a picnic, either
Death is natural	So are bullet ants and scabies, but an encounter with either is considered unfortunate
You are no longer a burden on your loved ones	Possible your loved ones were rather fond of you
Get to haunt those you had grudges against in life	Death probably made those grudges seem somewhat trivial
Eternal rest	Not much to do once you feel well-rested...
You get to be a skeleton, and skeletons are cool	Actually, skeletons are incredibly unsettling
You might get to meet God	All evidence suggests God is a dick
The dead do not suffer	They don't seem to smile much, either
There could be an afterlife	Afterlife could be pretty much like this life, only longer
Many great historical personages are dead, you'll be in good company	Might have to bunk with Mao or Scalia in Hell
Can finally wrestle Lincoln	Other spirits may frown on this

EVERY DISCUSSION OF LIFE EXTENSION MUST deal with two core objections: the population problem and the inequality problem. The first holds that however desirable life extension would be in principle, it would create a population crisis on earth and would therefore lead to either (1) mass misery and resource depletion or (2) totalitarian restrictions on childbirth in the manner of China’s infamous one-child policy. The inequality objection holds that life extension will inevitably be unequally distributed by class, and will simply result in rich people becoming immortal while the poor’s existences remain nasty, brutish, and short.

As to population, first, I do not think it is a particularly serious concern. Overpopulation fears from Malthus to *The Population Bomb* have always been drastically overblown. As countries develop economically, their birthrates drop drastically, to the point where countries eventually level off and achieve relative population stability. Innovations for more efficiently using resources, combined with a curtailment of the lifestyles of waste and excess encouraged by capitalism, could massively increase the earth’s capacity to support human life. Yes, the absolute elimination of death would ensure perpetual population growth. But the *elimination* of death is not

An illustration featuring ten men dressed in white shirts, red suspenders, and red trousers. They are depicted in various dynamic, floating poses against a solid blue background. Each man is blowing a stream of white bubbles, which are scattered throughout the scene. The men's expressions are joyful, and their bodies are angled in different directions, creating a sense of movement and playfulness. The central text is written in a white, serif font.

Surely
You'd Be
Better Off
Blowing
Bubbles

actually practically likely to occur. Instead, what we are talking about in practice is reorienting ourselves to see death as a problem in and of itself, and to take steps to reduce its occurrence as much as we can. We are, realistically, speaking, not actually going to create full immortality anytime soon, and if we ever did succeed in doing so, we would simply have to set ourselves to work on solving a new problem: spreading life elsewhere in the universe, either through finding other habitable planets or through terraforming uninhabitable ones. No, it wouldn't be easy, but we are speaking about long-term goals. In the meantime, attacking the problem of death should simply be done in conjunction with efforts to spread prosperity and birth control, and to eliminate the hideous and environmentally destructive waste created by a lifestyle grounded in consumption.

There is also something of a moral problem to believing that population fears should cause us to turn away from life extension research. If the moral argument in favor of life extension is freedom-based, namely that people should be free to live as long as they please due to their autonomous control over their own destinies, then the idea that we should deprive them of that freedom in order to make room for new people (who do not yet exist) is highly debatable. If, as I suggest, there is very little distinction between "declining to invest resources in efforts to prevent death" and "inflicting death on people against their will," then we are faced with the question of whether a person's right to create new life trumps an existing person's right to continue to live. Since I believe the right to remain living is crucial, I tend to think restrictions on birth are far more justifiable than the refusal to eliminate death. (Though as I say, I doubt things will come to that.)

THE INEQUALITY PROBLEM IS A FAR MORE serious one. Many of the most prominent people who have showed an interest in life extension are Silicon Valley billionaires. Nobody wants those people to live forever; inhabiting the same planet as them for even a short time is already a trying experience. Any successful life extension technology would be far more accessible to the rich, which might create an unprecedented and horrible new kind of feudal division, between those who died quickly and those who never died at all. And if death truly *is* as terrible as I believe it to be, the poor are then disproportionately saddled with something horrific that the rich can simply buy their way out of. There is already a divergence in average lifespans across classes in the United States, with life expectancy differing by as much as 20 years depending on whether you are on Native American reservation in the Dakotas or in a wealthy suburb in Colorado. By some measures, this divergence is getting worse, with some poor people's life expectancies actually shrinking even as the overall national average life expectancy increases. The better we learn how to prevent old age, the worse this will become.

It's difficult to get around the inequality problem. One could simply *justify* the inequality, and I am sure there are some utilitarians (and some utilitarian Silicon Valley billionaires) who would do so. But I share the belief that a situation in which billionaires never died but the rest of us did is probably one of the most horrifying kinds of dystopias, one that must be avoided (even if avoiding it means that *nobody* gets to have their lives extended). The

important point here, however, is that the inequality problem is a practical problem rather than a principled one. It's a problem because of the economic system we happen to live under. But it wouldn't be a problem under a different economic system, one without differences in access to life-saving medical treatments.

The elimination of differing health care access by social class seems, to me, to be a prerequisite to pursuing life extension. The first priority is to make sure that poor people have access to the same opportunities for (what are presently classified as) long lives as rich people. *Then* we can try to extend lives at the top end. In other words, first we should make sure everyone is living to 80 rather than dying of treatable illnesses at 50. After that we can talk about how to raise the average to 85 or 90 or 15,000.

In practice, then, my commitment to life extension comes after my commitment to creating a just economic system, because having a just economic system is the only way to ensure that life extension won't be implemented in a way that is horrendous. But since I strongly believe that life extension is an urgent moral imperative, I believe that creating a just economic system is an even more urgent moral imperative, and I would like us to get one quite quickly, so that we can eliminate death with all possible haste. We must solve life before we solve death. But also, we must solve death.

Whenever I discuss the problem of death with people, I end up feeling like a madman. To me, it is so obvious that life extension is an important human priority, that involuntary death is always a very bad thing and that everyone should agree that we should be trying to eliminate it as much as we possibly can. But people so easily accept the necessity and inevitability of death, they so quickly make up justifications for it, and they are so blasé about our need to stop it.

In fact, I often feel as if I have woken up on a spaceship heading for the center of the sun, where the crew seem to be making no effort to keep us from being incinerated. In response to my wondering why we don't try to steer the ship in a different direction, why we are accepting our trajectory as inevitable and natural, they come up with explanations for how plunging into the sun will give meaning to our voyage, or they explain why efforts to change the situation would be doomed to failure even though nobody has tried them. But for some reason I cannot resign myself; I cannot stop myself from thinking, over and over: "Why aren't we trying to steer the ship away from a path toward certain destruction of our lives? Why are we simply resigning ourselves and then jerry-building a narrative as to why this is both inevitable and desirable? How did I end up in this madness, and why am I the only one to whom it even appears as madness?"

I am a strong believer in the right to life. I believe we should all have as much life as we possibly can. And so the idea of opposing life extension research, in fact, of not seeing life-extension research as a top human priority, is to me pro-death. I see it as an essential issue for human freedom, perhaps the essential issue. Billions of people have lost their lives when they would not have chosen to. Because life is the most precious thing we have, we must do everything to make sure that future people do have this choice, that they can have as much life as they please. I believe in maximizing human capability and the control we have over our own destinies. Thus I cannot accept the fundamental absence of this control represented by death.

I am very strongly anti-death. Why isn't anybody else? ❖

ARGUMENT STARTERS







So you're looking for a way to liven up your latest cocktail evening or congressional slumber party, are you? Naturally, you don't want to play some mindless board game, you want something that stimulates the cerebellum, that encourages the full flowering of your prodigious intellect. You're in luck, kid: the Current Affairs Argument Starters kit is guaranteed to turn any gathering bitterly contentious. Simply make a deck of Argument Cards by scanning and printing the template below, and write contentious propositions on them. Then, each person must draw from the deck and try to defend the position. A rotating neutral judge will decide whether they have succeeded. If the judge thinks you've pulled it off, you get points according to how controversial your argument was. Fun has never been so exasperating!









































 **A DUBIOUS PROPOSITION – 1 POINT**

 **A CONTENTIOUS PROPOSITION – 3 POINTS**

 **AN OUTRAGEOUS PROPOSITION – 5 POINTS**

-  Every right the constitution grants to humans should also be granted to non-human animals.
-  Literally everyone in New York is intolerable.
-  Everyone should own a gun.
-  Children should not have to learn math beyond the arithmetic necessary for personal finance.
-  City-states were the optimal form of government and should be revived.
-  Ghosts are real.

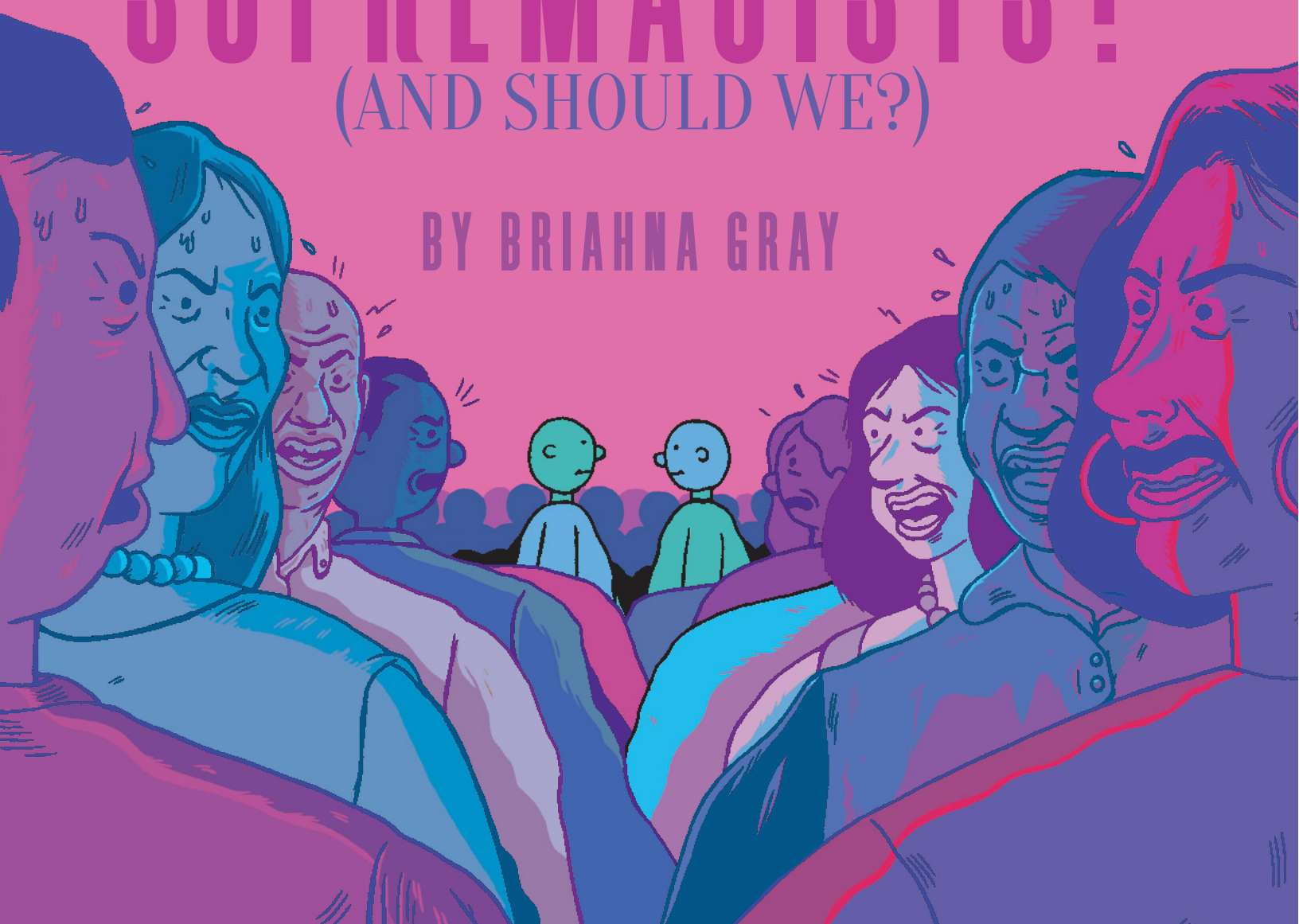
-  Native Americans should get to vote on whether we should blow up Mt. Rushmore. If a supermajority vote "yes," Mt. Rushmore will be blown up.
-  There is no inherent right to private property.
-  Love is a poisonous fiction.
-  It's okay to burn certain books.
-  You should have to get a license to parent.
-  Nature isn't actually that pretty.
-  Generally speaking, school is a waste of a child's time.
-  Skyscrapers ought to be abolished.
-  Clothing should be optional.
-  By a certain metric, Donald Trump is the greatest president in the history of the United States.
-  Children should be allowed to vote.
-  There should be no such things as borders between countries. People should be able to move freely about the world without ever having to get the permission of a government.
-  It is morally wrong to be rich.
-  Prisons should be abolished.
-  Canada is underrated.
-  Stealing is always justified if you really need something and the person you're stealing from clearly doesn't need it.
-  The universe is probably just a giant video game being played by a god with the brain of a five-year-old.
-  All beards are hideous.
-  Smokers are oppressed.
-  Shakespeare is overrated.

-  Every young person should be assigned an elderly person to take care of and cheer up.
-  The Middle Ages were underrated.
-  Medical researchers should try to make it so that human beings are immortal. A world in which nobody ever died would be a better world.
-  Young people should have to do a year of military service when they turn 18.
-  It would be wrong to kill baby Hitler.
-  Some art is objectively inferior to other art.
-  There are certain circumstances in which lying to a child is justified. If you want to get them to do something, for instance.
-  Wal-Mart is a force for good.
-  There are certain circumstances in which lying to your romantic partner is justified. If you want to make them happy, for instance.
-  Poetry should be prohibited by law. There is no such thing as a good poem.
-  Cats are capable of feeling emotions.
-  A judge who doesn't wear a wig isn't really a judge.
-  Good reality TV can be as worthwhile as good literature.
-  On balance, the universe was a mistake.
-  If everything could be done for us by machines, that would be a good thing.
-  The captain shouldn't have to go down with the ship if he doesn't want to.
-  There is nothing wrong with taking candy from a baby. Babies do not even really understand what candy is, and besides they shouldn't have it in the first place.
-  The internet should never have been invented.



CAN WE TALK TO WHITE SUPREMACISTS? (AND SHOULD WE?)

BY BRIAHNA GRAY



RECENTLY, I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT how to talk to white supremacists. Conventional wisdom says that it can't be done, at least not productively. For decades, Americans on both ends of the political spectrum have engaged in the project of shunting outright racism to the margins. As a result, we now consider racists to be monsters as foreign and grotesque as Godzilla. In fact, in the aftermath of the election, hundreds of thousands of keystrokes were devoted to answering the question of whether the left should deign to talk to *any* Trump voters, never mind avowed white supremacists. For many, the racist rhetoric that Trump rode to victory was so overt that anybody who voted for him lacked any "plausible deniability" of their bigotry.

These voters, it is assumed, cannot be persuaded. Although they are nearly demographically identical to the electorate that supported Romney, Bush, and McCain in past cycles, because Trump voters are *real* racists, the act of reaching out to them is a kind of political treason on the left, for whom explicit (but apparently not tacit) racism is a bridge too far. According to this logic, prejudice is as immutable a characteristic as skin color itself. And since racism is argued to be the single animating voting issue for this population, no appeals to other interests are worth making.

Not only is talking to Trump voters seen as futile, a desire to better understand them is often stigmatized as reflective of a *preference* for Trump voters and/or the bigoted ideologies that serve to marginalize communities of color, LGBTI persons, and religious minority groups. Bernie Sanders' statement that Democrats should talk to Trump voters has been used to imply he's racist. An A&E documentary about the Ku Klux Klan set to air in January was canceled in the wake of public backlash: audiences were convinced that the show would glamorize the KKK—a dangerous proposition in the age of Trump. In fact, the show was designed to do the opposite: it emphasized efforts to help extricate members of hate groups, including young children, from their environments. Regardless, the show was pulled from the schedule after it was revealed that its subjects were paid to participate—a tipping point that felt more like pretext than principle.

Moreover, among the political left, those who would talk to Trump voters to persuade them are recklessly conflated with those who would appease them through triangulation and compromise. People who empathize with these voters' *legitimate* economic concerns are accused of caring *more* about Trump voters than about other groups perceived to be more deserving of empathy. Strategists who seek to better understand right-wing beliefs in order to undermine them are perceived to value them instead. No conversation with a Trump supporter (and certainly none with white nationalists) is acceptable unless it is openly antagonistic.

I'M NOT CONVINCED THIS APPROACH IS HELPING.

As a practical matter, to write off a population as broad as "Trump voters" or even "white supremacists" is politically irresponsible. With respect to Trump voters, post election analysis

has proven that an electorally significant percentage were once Obama supporters. This means that either racism isn't as fixed as implied, or, in the alternative, that racists might be motivated by something other than hate at the ballot box. And although the idea of courting white supremacists is, of course, distasteful, doing so feels less controversial once you consider "white supremacy" to include a spectrum of beliefs from which few people are excluded. If everybody is racist, to refrain from talking to racists is to retreat from politics entirely.

Racists are said to wear white hoods, or perhaps now, white polo shirts. They can alternatively be identified by a swastika armband, or a Confederate license plate. Because neither Democrats nor Republicans are above wielding class as a weapon when convenient, we are also told that they lack teeth, thirst for Mountain Dew, and are, on the whole, "deplorables." They are beneath political acknowledgment, beyond redemption.

But white supremacy is not limited to those who have made it a defining sartorial characteristic. The Republican Party may get the vast majority of the Klan vote these days, but the ideology of white supremacy is bipartisan. White supremacy is deeply ingrained in people of all political stripes, because it's such an inextricable part of the American subconscious. It can be found in the presumption that urban black and Latino youths are uniquely lacking in empathy, making them "super-predators," or that a black presidential candidate wouldn't be "clean" or "articulate," or that the achievement gap is due to innate, biological factors. The century-long failure to remove Confederate monuments from public plazas makes the American public writ large complicit in white supremacy. Pretending that white supremacists are typified by, for example, Charlottesville protesters, vastly understates the problem. (In fact, implicit bias tests show that even ethnic minorities harbor bias against other people of color. Tests that measure how quickly a person is able to associate white faces or black faces with various objects or words, or accurately identify men of various races who are holding guns rather than ones holding innocuous gun-sized objects, reveal that even the most valiant of social justice warriors show a "moderate automatic association between weapons and black faces," as my own test revealed.)

Last summer, liberals breathlessly cited a Reuters poll showing that 40% of Trump supporters believed that blacks were more "lazy" than whites. Most ignored the findings showing that 25% of Clinton voters agreed. Either the 22.5% of Clinton voters who believe that blacks are "less intelligent" *aren't* racist, or issues beyond white supremacy motivate these people's votes. Speaking to these people is clearly a feature of doing politics, and a refusal to do so simply cedes these people to the other side, to disastrous consequence.

So if everyone's a little bit white supremacist, public proclamations about who we will and won't talk to seem, well, a little bit silly. But even if we only think pragmatically, it's important to know thy enemy. The odds that a good chat can convince a racist to swap the KKK for BLM are slim, but those seeking to exert national political influence would do well to think about how to best communicate with all Americans.

“THE ODDS THAT A GOOD CHAT CAN CONVINCE A RACIST TO SWAP THE KKK FOR BLM ARE SLIM, BUT THOSE SEEKING TO EXERT NATIONAL POLITICAL INFLUENCE WOULD DO WELL TO THINK ABOUT HOW TO BEST COMMUNICATE WITH ALL AMERICANS.”

But I do think historical context is a powerful corrective. Research suggests that our perception of the Confederate insurrection is significantly influenced by what we were taught about it in school. Children who learned about “the war of northern aggression” or “the war between states” are less likely to view Confederate statues as monuments to slave-owners than those who learned about the “Civil War.” Students who were taught about the cruel and inhumane living conditions to which enslaved blacks were subjected are less likely to “cling to the romanticized versions of the happy slave life.”

Many Americans learned only recently (or are still unaware)

So: *how* do we to talk to those who are, at best, indifferent to, and at worst, enthusiastic supporters of the white supremacy that characterizes Trump’s presidency and the country more broadly?

White supremacists appear to fall into two camps: they either don’t care that they’re racist, or, somewhat remarkably, they persist in believing that they are not racist in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. One notable defender of the Charlottesville protest managed to unironically utter the phrase “Martin Luther Coon” in the middle of his case for why celebrating the Confederacy *isn’t* racist. Suffice it to say, in the face of such shamelessness, I am skeptical about how far guilt, the favored liberal method will take us. Often it just induces anger and threats. When members of an online group called “Upper East Side moms” were called “racist” for downplaying the importance of white supremacy, they did not immediately “check their privilege” and repent. Instead, they threatened legal action. If the Upper East Side moms can’t be shamed out of their racist beliefs, it’s unlikely to work on a man wielding a Tiki torch.

that the majority of Confederate statues were not actually raised to commemorate dead soldiers, but were put up during Reconstruction and the civil rights era—periods during which black political and economic power grew—in an effort to instill fear in blacks and make tangible the always present specter of racial violence. Understanding that context, and realizing that the statues aren’t actually historic in any meaningful sense, makes it easier to conclude that they should come down. Working to give people a better understanding of American history, ancient history, science, immigration patterns, and the myriad ways non-Europeans have contributed (and birthed) civilization is guaranteed to be more effective than telling a man with a swastika tattoo he’s racist.

IN THE MEDIA INTERVIEWS OF MEMBERS OF THE FAR right after Charlottesville, we could see many excellent examples of what *not* to do. Too often, journalists came to these discussions unprepared to handle their subjects effectively. Some recoiled with shock and were derailed by the open expression of bigotry that, presumably, made the chosen interviewee an attractive subject to begin with. Opportunities to challenge the subjects effectively were missed.

Recently, an interview with KKK leader Chris Barker by Afro-Latina journalist Ilia Calderón made headlines after he threatened to “burn” the reporter—along with 11 million undocumented immigrants—“out” of the country the same way that “we” (presumably meaning white supremacists) killed six million Jewish people in the Holocaust. The interviewee was a horrifying individual. But it’s worth thinking about how to deal with someone like this.

Barker opened with a version of the classic salvo: “Why don’t you go back to your own country if it’s so great?” Any journalist preparing to interview a Klansman, especially if that journalist is a Colombian immigrant who has covered immigration and anti-Latino sentiment in America, should be prepared for that kind of remark. But Calderón took the bait, responding: “I go back all the time.” Instead of challenging the premise of the question—which was that Barker (who apparently identifies more with WWII-era Germans than Americans) has an intrinsic right to this country that supersedes that of people of color—Calderón defended the value of Colombia. It’s a fine country, of course, but that’s not the point. Whether or not Calderón or any other immigrant likes or returns to their country of birth is immaterial to whether they should be extended various rights and freedoms in the United States. But Calderón, seemingly unprepared for a fairly standard dose of racist rhetoric, debates on the white supremacist’s terms rather than challenging his faulty presumption that Calderón’s value as a human being is somehow linked to how fond she is of Colombia.

When Barker later threatens: “I’ll chase you out of here,” Calderón parrots back mockingly: “Oh, you’ll chase me out of here?” Repeating your rhetorical opponent’s last words is never sign of a strong argument, and perhaps predictably, Barker escalates by calling Calderón a n*gger. Calderón replies she finds that offensive (as though offense wasn’t the purpose of the slur), and

IN DEFENCE OF HELLFIRE

These are difficult times for writers who wish to specialize in the genre of Moral Harangue. We live, alas, in an era where persuasive writing is largely comprised of lukewarm appeals to self-interest. A writer must show their readers they have something to gain—or, at the very least, nothing to lose—by taking some particular form of action, on global warming or immigration or insect rights or what have you. Do Moral Action X because it will Actually Be Better For You Yourself. Where self-interest fails, the next step is an appeal to emotion. Infants will

that unless s/he agreed with the posited thesis, and mended her/his ways accordingly, they could burn in hellfire for all eternity.

Now *this* was persuasion. “If you don’t do the right thing, God will light you on fire!!!!” Even the most languid newsstand browser could be shaken by a good dose of the brimstone.

“I have to do the right thing?” they might say, tentatively. “Or God will punish me?”

“Yes!” you reply triumphantly. “The unbearable knowledge of the evil you did to your fellow man will



suffer! Grandmothers will detonate! Adorable furry mammals will be ground into a viscous paste! When you can’t motivate through avarice, you must try motivating through sentiment.

But what about when the object of your concern is too abstract or unsympathetic, or your reader is especially hard-hearted and indifferent? Then you must resort to some vague call for moral decency. It would be bad not to do this thing, you say—it would be *wrong*.

“What do these things mean, ‘bad’ and ‘wrong’?” says The Reader. “Will something unpleasant happen to me personally if I don’t do it?”

“No,” you admit with a sigh of reluctance.

“Realistically speaking, will it keep me up at night in anguished guilt? As you know,” says The Reader, “I am a remarkably sound sleeper.”

“No, probably not,” you concede. “Nevertheless: you would be a bad person! Even if you are able to put your misdeed out of mind, the badness would just stick to you forever like an industrial epoxy! Is that what you want for yourself?”

“Sorry,” says The Reader, “what were we talking about again? I’ve already forgotten.”

It is at moments like these, when one craves a useful rhetorical stick with which to beat the consumer into Right Moral Conduct, that we think fondly of The Olden Days. Once, back before Logical Positivism and the accidental death of God, the opinion writer could simply warn the reader

consume your entire consciousness until the end of time!”

“Oh, is that all?”

“And also,” you reiterate hastily, “you will literally be on fire.”

Ah, hellfire! How wondrously effective the threat of being consumed by it can be! How simple things were when ethical behavior could be coerced through threats of divine fury, rather than having to be cajoled through weak exhortations toward utility-maximization and exploitations of the human tendency toward weepiness.

We recognize that we touch here upon a delicate and moderately contentious subject, i.e. the foundations of theology and ethics. Nevertheless, to serve the human good, we propose to spread around fresh rumors of the existence of hellfire—cautiously, you know, just to see if they take. Henceforth, we shall go beyond implying that the reader who disagrees with our decrees is a mere nincompoop. They will also be a damned nincompoop, in the expression’s most literal sense.

Per our new editorial resolution, then: instead of reading bland argumentative essays, which tediously respond to objections and attempt to carefully justify their assumptions, you will soon be reading passionate, accusatory, sulfur-scented jeremiads in the style of the King James Bible. Think how much more fun that will be for all of us! Everlasting torment awaits the reader who doubts the truth of our words!

LETTERS

To the editors,

I am disappointed in Nathan Robinson’s reporting. It seems all he can do is bash the Democratic Party—which is the only viable opposition to Trump right in the coming elections. I am wondering if Current Affairs isn’t actually a Putin-funded deal to continually create more division in this country. The Democrats are doing a great job holding their own while having to deal with basically a takeover by the Republican Party... There are rumors that many in the Republican Party are taking money from Russia. And do you want to discuss the abhorrent racism and division they are creating?? But, no, the main (and only) reporter spends his time bashing the Democrats instead of applauding them for trying to uphold any standard of morality this country has left!!! In doing this, I feel your magazine should be counted as nothing but a Russian divisive tactic... Your publication should shut itself down and be ashamed. By bashing the only things right and good in our country, you are part of the problem and are contributing to its downfall.

Darlene Yamrose
U.S. Citizen

Дорогой товарищ Ямроуз,

Русский сюжет? Вы заставляете нас смеяться! Наш журнал является американским, как ювенильный диабет или Pizza Rat. Мы искренние патриотические либералы, которые хотят снова сделать Америку отличной. У президента Путина нет значительного редакционного вклада в наш контент. О, конечно, он призывает нас время от времени предлагать «предложения» или посылать нам некоторые внутренние документы DNC, которые, по его мнению, нам могут быть интересны. Но мы не несем юридической обязанности следовать его совету. Для вас иначе думать смешно!

С уважением,
Текущие дела

To the editors:

In the most recent installment of “Quick Fixes to Vexing Social Problems,” Current Affairs advocates a conciliatory approach to the War on Spiders, suggesting that “instead of exterminating the spiders, each spider will be required to wear an amusing little hat, in order to make it visually less frightening.” I object to this ludicrous and irresponsible proposal in the strongest possible terms. If you were being hacked to death by a crazed axe-murderer, would you care whether he happened to be wearing a charming chapeau? No hat, however tiny, can mitigate the seriousness of the arachnid menace.

If anything, by trivializing this threat, Current Affairs lulls the populace into a false sense of security. There is a reason why fear of spiders is encoded deep in the genetic makeup of the wisest among our species. We retain the ancestral memory of those dark millennia, lost to our written annals, when spiders ruled the land and all humankind was held in bondage as living larders for our many-limbed oppressors. Even now, they wait, and bide, and plot! They skittle undetected beneath your floorboards! They cluster in the recesses of your plumbing! In every corner of your house, they are spewing wet clutches of eggs, and slurping the juices of their bound and struggling prey! The grotesque filaments of their spindly legs have touched the faces of your loved ones as they sleep! AND YOU TALK OF LITTLE HATS!

Anonymous

Dear “Anonymous,”

While we in no way wish to invalidate your strongly-held conviction on the subject of spiders, the position you defend is more commonly known as “arachnophobia,” which, like its close relatives homophobia and Islamophobia, is today considered a form of bigotry. Everything you say of spiders (“biding and plotting,” “wet clutches of eggs,” “spindly legs”) was once said of other minority groups, and provided the ideological justification for some of the bloodiest horrors of the 20th century. Your fears, though plainly sincere, are the relic of a less enlightened time, before absolute equality of species became recognized as the moral imperative it is. The “War On Spiders” mentality belongs on FOX News, not in a journal of progressive political thought.

It is our hope that someday you may recognize the hurtful backwardness of your views. We cannot hope to persuade you with reason, but we would ask you to reflect and empathize: how would you feel, as a brown recluse or wolf spider, being described in the above terms? To hear all of your accomplishments and aspirations dismissed, to see yourself reduced to your “grotesque filaments” and your penchant for slurping the juices of your prey? Would you like it? You would not. The bird-eating spider does more than just eat birds, yet it is the birds upon which we fixate. Why should this be so? The answer is that it should not be so.

You may be surprised just how many spiders you have been living alongside peaceably all your life. Perhaps some of your dearest friends identify as arachnids, but hesitate to reveal themselves to you. It may surprise you to learn that the Current Affairs offices are overrun with spiders, who produce some of our magazine’s best work.

Eventually, sentiments like yours will be confined to the historical dustbin, draped in the very cobwebs they once so ignorantly maligned. You are right that there is an oppressive menace in our midst. But it is not spiders. It is prejudice.

CORRECTION

A recent article mistakenly referred to sportscaster Skip Bayless, when it intended to refer to celebrity chef Rick Bayless, a specialist in Mexican cuisine and the brother of S. Bayless. The error was regrettable, and may have convinced certain readers that Current Affairs thought ESPN commentary could constitute a form of cultural appropriation. While some may subscribe to this position, it has never been our own.

the interview, from the perspective of the viewer, ends.

I highlight this interview not to further antagonize Calderón or to blame her for Barker's racism—she's been through enough. What this interview shows is that the reason "talking to racists" and/or Trump supporters is perceived as futile is because, *in the way it's often attempted*, it is. A well-equipped interviewer would come with nerves steeled and armed with facts about inventors and poets and architects of color whose very existence disproves the myth of white superiority. She would be a historian who could point to the independent origins of math and science and medical knowledge all around the globe—often centuries before those insights made it to Europe. She would be able to listen without reacting, and use compassion (whether sincere or not) to disarm and elucidate.

When the white supremacist's wife chides him to "watch your mouth" after he calls Calderón a n*gger, she might have asked her why she stepped in on his behalf. My instinct is that this moment of civility was an opening to a conversation which might have forced Baker's wife to recognize Calderón's humanity. Is that guaranteed? Of course not. But I have yet to see evidence that it's not worth trying: as far as I can see, it is rarely sincerely attempted, and when it is, it's met with some success.

TAKE THE EXAMPLE OF DARYL DAVIS, AN AFRICAN American blues maestro made famous for convincing over a dozen members of the Klan to both literally and figuratively hang up their robes. This white whisperer has said that the most important lesson he took from his years of befriending and converting white supremacists "is that when you are actively learning about someone else you are passively teaching them about yourself." An interviewer positioned to learn and listen, rather than react, might advance mutual understanding by teaching by example. Davis has over a dozen Klan robes in his closet, each of which represents a Klansman who has given up the KKK after befriending Davis. In the face of those results, I, for one, am eager to give persuasion a try.

It's hard to discern from the short available clip of Calderón's interview with Baker what her goals were, or if she had other questions that might have done more than sharpen our expectations of *What A Racist Sounds Like*. But after watching this and other similar encounters with white supremacists, I would have loved to have heard Calderón's interviewee answer the following questions:

❖ When did *your* family immigrate to America? Should white Americans, the majority of whom immigrated to the United States well after Black Americans (not to mention Native Americans), also have to repatriate? Why not?

❖ How did you come to believe whites are superior? What did your parents tell you about race? Have you ever had a meal with a non-white person? (Wanna grab some Chinese food?)

❖ How do you reconcile your support of genocide with the teachings of your religious faith—a faith which you've referenced in this interview?

❖ What are the biggest political issues your family is struggling with? Unemployment? Lack of healthcare? Poverty?

Which political party is most likely to address those issues? Do you accept public assistance? Are you on Obamacare?

❖ What is it about white people that makes you believe in your own superiority? What is it about others that makes you believe they are inferior?

I don't mean to imply that speaking to white supremacists is an easy job. Last Thanksgiving, I interviewed a Trump voter for my podcast, and though I had prepared pages of notes, I, too, was drawn into the rhetorical weeds by my interviewee's interjections about how Black Lives Matter is a terrorist organization, and why Obama is the "real racist." But although I was at times derailed, the frolics and detours I entertained were ones from which I learned. I learned that the imprecise and exaggerated language liberals use at times to express offense often does more harm than good: Trump's statements regarding Mexicans were bad enough without mis-attributing to him the sentence "all Mexicans are rapists," as Tim Kaine did last August, a choice which made liberals vulnerable to accusations of "fake news." I learned that the gap between how liberals and conservatives understand racism is largely rooted in an ignorance about history: for example, when I attempted to ground the justification for government assistance in the history of the government's sponsorship of racism, my interview subject claimed to "not know much" about *Brown v. Board* or redlining. And as contentious and exasperating as that interview was, I learned the important lesson that it's possible to inch slowly toward some mutual understanding. Centrist Democrats famously champion incrementalism. This would be a good time to put that patience to work.

LET ME BE CLEAR ABOUT THIS: I CAN'T GUARANTEE results, but I'm encouraged by the evidence. Barack Obama effectively used the rhetoric of racial understanding to bring the much-discussed "working class whites" to the polls in a way that Hillary failed to do. As part of his Unity Tour last March, Bernie Sanders visited McDowell County, West Virginia, a county that overwhelmingly voted for Trump, and managed to convince at least one rural white Trump voter that "every American citizen should have health care"—this despite the fact that the voter appeared to be as much a caricature of a "deplorable" as any that has ever lived in the Democratic imagination. Of course, there's no indication that the coal miner Sanders persuaded is a neo-Nazi—nor was the acquaintance I interviewed on my podcast. But a certain brand of liberalism would still assume him too irredeemable to be fit for a progressive coalition, solely because he voted for Trump. That way of thinking has to end.

No one *has* to talk to an avowed white supremacist. Certainly no person of color should feel compelled to place themselves in the crosshairs of white supremacist hate speech. Having one's intrinsic worth questioned so frankly is an assault on one's personhood second perhaps only to violent assault. Even less overt forms of racism have measurable impacts on the mental and physical health of people of color. But systemically, the left must engage. It's the only way to get rid of racism, and it's the only way to win. ❖

the current affairs

INSTAPOET™

You are, of course, an aspiring poet. But the market for verse just ain't what it used to be. If you're going to be a prize-winner, you'll need to issue top-shelf material. Not only that, but you'll have to produce reams of it. To do that, you'll need a method for disgorging the stuff with speed. This is why Current Affairs is here. With the Current Affairs "Instapoet" method, you can create a brilliant free verse poem out of any simple English sentence.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Write sentence. Add some line breaks.
Repeat as needed.

After this, I haven't got anything left except my sadness.

After this
I haven't
got
anything
left
except my
sadness

TRY YOUR OWN

When you grow up, you may end up doing the same things to other people as were once done to you.

When you
grow up
you may
end up
doing the
same things to
other people
as were once
done
to you.

There is a dripping leak in my kitchen ceiling and I need to call someone to fix it but I am scared of having strangers in my house.

There is a
dripping
leak
in my kitchen ceiling
and I need
to call someone to fix it but
I am scared of having
strangers
in my
house

ADVANCED
TECHNIQUE:
indents + ampersands

how h&es^
my dread&&
become--
the &only co nstant
!! in an otherwise
perfect/tumult



YOU MADE IT TO THE WHITE HOUSE, BUT NOW YOU'LL NEED TO GET THE PRESIDENT'S ATTENTION!

Steve Bannon—slowly rotting into human sludge from a combination of tertiary syphilis, “cocainer’s spleen,” and a genuine witch’s curse—asks you to ferry a message to Trump. Roll a die. If Bannon is in favor (1-3), advance eight spaces. If not in favor (4-6), retreat eight spaces.

Replace the nuclear codes with lottery tickets!



Invent a hostile nation just begging to be invaded.



Ride the fascist rollercoaster! Denounce! Applaud! Denounce! Applaud!

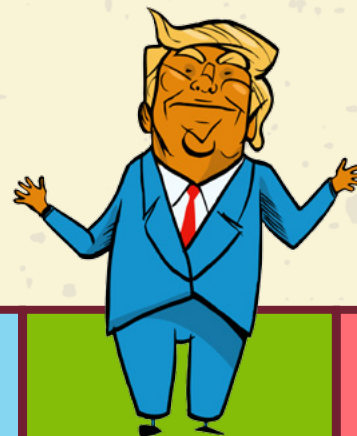
Go Directly to Jail.
Do Not Pass On Your Book Deal.
Do Collect
Flattering Profile Pieces.

QUICKSAND! Literal quicksand! DO NOT MOVE. Moving makes it worse.



Write an impassioned, detailed, carefully researched memo outlining the political and economic advantages of your puppy-eating policy. No one reads it. Lose a turn.

Leak. Spill. Ooze. Vomit your darkest secrets to the press. (No effect. Roll Again.)



Get smugly mocked on SNL.
‘Twas quite droll!

SNL

The Secret Service stops you in the hallway. The President is attending an important meeting in his bathroom, tweeting furiously at North Korea and his own toxic bowels. Wait an hour, then roll again.

Sebastian Gorka would like you to wear a medal from the Noble Order of the Hungarian Knights of the Abominable Cause. He’s very insistent. Go back six spaces.



Go on Fox News.
“President Trump has won every election since 1776!”



JUSTIN TRUDEAU: dreamboat or MONSTER?

ON OCTOBER 19TH, 2015, CANADA'S HISTORICALLY dominant political party was returned to power, almost exactly reestablishing the dynamic that had reigned the country throughout most of the 20th century. Yet the relative banality of this event was belied by the positively rapturous commentary that ensued in the weeks and months that followed. Historic! Stunning! A new dawn! Canada. Is. Back. So gushing and hyperbolic was the coverage that a casual observer could have been forgiven for thinking the country had undergone a seismic political transformation and elected radical new leadership, rather than electing the son of a former prime minister at the head of an inveterately centrist brokerage party.

"Canada lurches to the left" proclaimed David Frum in *The Atlantic*, equating Trudeau with the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. The UK's *Express* called him "Canada's new left-wing PM." Trudeau's pledge to run modest budget deficits even earned him an "anti-austerity" label, and *The Independent's* Hannah Fearn declared that his government was "shaping up to be one of the most ambitious liberal premierships in modern history."

Trudeau-themed clickbait burst forth in a mighty stream, with a sickly and unrelenting deluge of schmalzy profiles of the new

Dauphine of Davos. The Trudeau brand took the internet by storm thanks to a series of Candid™ moments showcasing the adorable statesman in Star Wars regalia, Spontaneously™ "photobombing" weddings, and Accidentally™ losing his shirt in all kinds of places where professional photographers were readily available to immortalize the mishap. Social media swooned at his yoga poses and his variety of colorful themed socks. Even in an age where grown adults earnestly debate Hodor's stance on the minimum wage and wonder aloud whether Dumbledore would have backed Brexit, the resulting headlines seemed a burlesque satire of the internet at its most embarrassing:

"Ryan Gosling Knows Justin Trudeau Is Also Your Boyfriend"

"Trudeau does jazz hands at G20"

"Justin Trudeau's 7 Secrets to Being Extraordinarily Charming"

"Canada's New Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, Is a Smoking-Hot Syrupy Fox: See Twitter Go Nuts!"

"Meet the prime minister of Canada, our new man crush"

"Canadian PM Justin Trudeau is really really ridiculously good-looking. And, yes, it matters."

One could almost forget that Trudeau has "politics" at all, or that prime ministers are officials who wield considerable power over the lives of human beings.

Note: There has been contentious disagreement among the Current Affairs editorial staff on the subject of Justin Trudeau. The editor, the copy department, the Sports Desk, and the Egypt Bureau share the opinion of our Canadian correspondent Mr. Luke Savage (M. Luc Sauvage) on the subject of Prime Minister Trudeau, i.e. that he is an untrustworthy airhead who represents the final triumph of Image over Substance in politics. A dissenting faction, however, consisting of the senior editors, the advertising department, and the other international desks, has concluded that Trudeau is "so fucking cute" and "just too adorable for words." There was considerable dispute as to how to approach the publication of this piece, which implies strongly the Trudeau is neither totally amazing nor scrumptiously cute. A compromise has been reached: the article has been printed in its original form, but the dissenting faction has been allowed to choose the accompanying photographs and write their captions. In this way, we hope that a balanced portrait of Trudeau can be achieved.



IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THE TRUDEAU phenomenon independently of the national and international contexts that produced it. Like any brand or commodity, it has grown by appealing to people's tastes and capitalizing on their desires. Canada had experienced almost ten years of right wing rule under the iron hand of authoritarian hockey dad Stephen Harper. As in America after two terms of Bush, there was a genuine hunger for change—*any* change—and an inclination to give anyone peddling it, whoever they turned out to be, a warm reception and the subsequent benefit of the doubt. (For a variety of reasons, the social democratic NDP was unable to capitalize on this feeling and blew an early election lead to the Liberals.)

Internationally, the current of liberalism Trudeau represents—one closely aligned with senior figures in the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party—finds itself uniquely challenged from both the left and right. As such, some have clearly found comfort in the idea that good old-fashioned liberal reformism is thriving north

of the 49th parallel, standing defiant against the fascistic carnival of Trumpism (a recent cover of *Rolling Stone*, boasting a beaming portrait of Trudeau, asked: “Why can’t he be our president?”). To global elites, Trudeau’s success is reassurance that the disastrous order they’ve spent the past several decades presiding over has life in it yet and can be salvaged from oblivion, one superficial gesture or viral video at a time. To many ordinary people, particularly in the liberally-minded middle classes, he offers up a comforting image of rational, well-intentioned, progressive leadership.

OF COURSE, LIKE MANY A PAINSTAKINGLY branded product, the reality of Trudeau is altogether different from the account that appears on the label or company website. Nearly two years on from his election, Trudeau has already broken many of his campaign promises. There was the pledge to end Canada’s combat mission in Iraq and Syria—a mission that was almost immediately expanded and continues to involve a conspicuous amount of fighting. Or the explicit commitment that 2015 would mark the last election under the country’s anachronistic, 19th-century voting system. Trudeau and his allies publicly pledged over 1,800 times to replace the system, but the promise was cynically abandoned when it became politically ill-advised.

Then there was the promise to implement “fully [and] without qualification” the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples such that, among other things, indigenous First Nations would have full veto over natural resource development in their territories. Not only has Trudeau’s government since approved two major pipeline projects, but it almost immediately walked back its commitment to implementing the declaration, glibly dismissing it as “unworkable” and stating that it wouldn’t be adopted into Canadian law after all. Equally repugnant is the \$15 billion arms deal with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, vigorously opposed by the Liberals while they were in opposition, before they implemented it in government as part of a plan to make Canada a major player in the Middle East arms export market.

Pushing all the right rhetorical buttons, Trudeau generated tremendous buzz by promising to raise taxes on “the 1%” (while cutting them for the “middle class”) and run deficits to pay for unspecified “social infrastructure.” Upon delivery, as it turned out, the much-heralded deficit spending became in effect a massive shouldering of risk by the public to mostly private gain and the tax plan a costly giveaway to the top 10% of earners. Far, then, from resurrecting Keynes or channeling Occupy Wall Street, Trudeau offered a harmless, focus-grouped populism that carefully avoided alienating the interests of corporations and the well-off.

Over and over since coming into office, Trudeau has spoken like Bernie Sanders and then governed like Larry Summers. In a speech to an elite audience at the St. Matthew’s Day Banquet in Hamburg earlier this year, Trudeau again gestured in a softly populist direction. When “companies post record profits on the backs of workers consistently refused full-time work,” he declared, “people get defeated... When governments serve special interests instead of the citizens’ interests who elected them, people lose faith.” The press responded with fevered speculation about a renewed “left turn” in Ottawa ahead of the upcoming federal budget. Inevitably, though, the budget delivered nothing of the kind, promising only to “build stronger communities,” “lead globally and create jobs for Canadians,” and “a government that puts people first.” Yet Trudeau’s

progressive halo has continued to shine brightly both at home and abroad. The success of Trudeau as media spectacle has allowed him to maintain a spotless image despite barely lifting a finger in support of leftist goals.

But to accuse Trudeau of mere hypocrisy and promise-breaking is to miss just how troubling his political project really is. Trudeau in fact represents a deeply cynical kind of politics, one that affixes a progressive sheen to the status quo. Trudeau has considerable personal talent for sounding both vaguely left-leaning and ideologically ambidextrous, while incorporating the insipid vernacular of the boardroom, state bureaucracy, or industry conference luncheon. (Incidentally, before entering politics, Trudeau spent time on the public-speaking circuit giving lavishly-paid talks to industry conference luncheons.)

TRUDEAU'S SPEECHES ARE FULL OF UPLIFTING bromides. Once, summing up his political ethos, Trudeau declared: "History shows that this country works best when we all work together to solve the problems that matter most to Canadians." Closing a televised election debate, he proclaimed: "We are who we are and Canada is what it is because in our hearts we've always known that better is always possible." And during a 2015 stump speech, he announced: "We're proposing a strong and real plan. We can grow the economy not from the top down... but from the heart outwards." In a 2014 speech he explained the Liberal Party's economic philosophy as follows:

"Too much government is an enemy of freedom and opportunity, but so too is too little. Governments can't do everything, nor should they try. But the things it does [sic], it must do well. As Larry Summers reminded us on Thursday, fiscal discipline is important, but sustained growth is the only route to balanced budgets over the long-term. To create that growth, we have to get the big things right."



Here we see the Trudeau style in full form: blandly reassuring, managerial, and entirely devoid of ideological specificity or commitment. Anyone can find a nod to her political proclivities—for a more or less activist government; for higher or lower taxes; for a larger or smaller welfare state—buried somewhere in there. Government shouldn't be too big, and it shouldn't be too small. Canada is great because of the things that make it great. When you speak in tautologies, nobody can disagree with you.

It's easy to mock vacuous talk about growing the economy "from the heart outwards." But Trudeau's politics are not actually "empty." He has been quite explicit about his actual function. In a 2013 essay addressed to Canadian elites entitled "Why It's Vital We Support The Middle Class," he wrote:

"National business leaders and other wealthy Canadians should draw the following conclusion, and do so urgently: If we do not solve [the problems facing the middle class and low-income earners], Canadians will eventually withdraw their support for a growth agenda. We will all be worse off as a consequence...Deepening anxiety yields deepening divisions in every society, and we are not immune to that vicious cycle here in Canada. We will begin to vote for leaders who offer comforting stories about who to blame for our problems, rather than how to solve them."

Trudeau is clear: inequality, understood by some as a moral problem, risks making the less well-off "anxious" such that they "withdraw their support for a growth agenda." They may even elect new leadership with the audacity to point its dirty fingers squarely at elites. (Heaven forbid!) Taking measures to alleviate the worst effects of inequality is a route to preserving the present system of wealth distribution, not dismantling it. (Sure enough, once in office Trudeau was swiftly embroiled in a cash-for-access scandal, as it became clear that wealthy donors at Liberal fundraisers could purchase Trudeau's attention. Of course, one could say that this is no different from what



any other politician has done, but that's precisely the point.)

On the one-year anniversary of his election Trudeau once again let the mask slip, this time in response to a question about how his government was navigating the unpopularity of neoliberal globalization at the present political moment:

"We were able to sign a free trade agreement with Europe at a time when people tend to be closing off. We're actually able to approve pipelines at a time when everyone wants protection of the environment. We're being able to show that we get people's fears and there are constructive ways of allaying them—and not just ways to lash out and give a big kick to the system."

It was a bizarre but revealing comment: Trudeau, the would-be progressive savior, effectively boasting about his government's success in perpetuating a widely-disliked status quo—not by actually changing anything, but rather by "allaying people's fears" so that the cogs of the global economy could continue to spin without interruption.

Trudeau, then, does not "stand for nothing." He stands for things as they are, albeit with a little more sympathy toward LGBT people and refugees. But Trudeau has also made clear that

the assistance of a generally compliant media, the party most synonymous with the country's social and economic elite successfully positioned itself, not for the first time, as the standard bearer of progressive change.

IN THIS RESPECT, CHARLES TAYLOR'S OBSERVATION ABOUT the elder Trudeau, penned nearly a half century ago, strikes an eerily familiar chord:

"Trudeaumania provided the ideal psychological compromise between [two]... contradictory drives. The Trudeau image offered all the excitement of change... while offering the reassurance which the average man could read in the benign reactions of power and privilege—that no serious challenge would be offered to the way things are. The act looked terrific, but everyone knew that no crockery was going to be broken. Everyone could relax and indulge the yearning for change without arousing the fear of novelty."

American progressives remember well the frenetic euphoria of 2008 and the almost transcendent rhetoric that accompanied the election of Barack Obama, a candidate who happily accepted



Left: Trudeau adorably conducts a trade discussion while wearing Star Wars socks. Next: Can your head of state do this? Next: This is photoshopped, but how we wish it were real! Right: Look how good he is with kids! Awwww.

his values are malleable and respond to political circumstance. After beginning his term with an unusually courageous invitation to refugees, according to *The Guardian*, Trudeau soon began to "backtrack," and "set out to tone down the welcoming image his government has cultivated."

Electoral considerations weigh heavily in determining Trudeau's principles. In response to questions from students at the University of British Columbia about why he was voting in favor of a draconian Conservative bill widely seen as an assault on basic civil liberties, he responded as follows:

"We know that, tactically, this government would be perfectly happy if the opposition completely voted against this bill because it fits into their fear narrative and [their desire to]...bash people on security. I do not want this government making political hay out of an issue...or trying to, out of an issue as important as security for Canadians."

Then followed the kicker: "This conversation might be different if we weren't months from an election campaign, but we are."

DESPITE ALL THE FANFARE IT HAS GENERATED, THE Justin Trudeau phenomenon is in many ways thoroughly unremarkable. This is because, stripped of its pretensions, it represents something all too familiar in Canada and elsewhere. Armed with platitudes, marketing savvy, cultural nostalgia, and

more donations from Wall Street than any other in history and bent over backwards to appease the country's most noxious elites. As with Obama, Trudeau's meticulously groomed, post-political brand is pure artifice: a place where the hyper-professionalized, marketing-obsessed world of modern campaigning converges with capitalism's preference for the personal over the political, and elevating form over content. And like Obama, Trudeau is a winning brand, so self-deprecating and likable, and with such a winning smile, that it's impossible to truly hate him. (It's no wonder Obama's 2008 presidential run won a "Marketing Campaign of the Year" award from the advertising industry.)

This politics seeks the ephemeral sensation of change instead of the real thing. In place of a coherent program, it offers scripted sound-bites and superficially progressive language designed to appease and comfort. Scratching its surface, we find not the youthful energy, dynamism, or innovation it claims for itself, but conventional political cowardice. And Justin Trudeau, more efficiently than any other current Western leader, has successfully fused elite liberalism with progressive rhetoric and new communications tools to produce a quintessentially 21st-century politics of spectacle. In the absence of a vibrant left wing alternative—in Canada and around the world—this may turn out to be the fate awaiting all democratic politics in the decades ahead. ♦



TRUDEAU
SOCKS FOR EVERY OCCASSION



IS HUMANE IMMIGRATI

by Brianna Rennix

photos by Avery White



THIS IS A DEPRESSING TIME TO BE AN IMMIGRANT in the United States. In the White House, we have a fickle narcissist surrounded by a volatile rotating cast of xenophobes, nativist populists, and homeland security hawks. In Congress, we have an Ayn Rand-style Republican wing that despises the poor generally, and the immigrant poor especially: and, spearheading the efforts against them, the most ineffectual and untrustworthy Democratic leadership imaginable.

The Democrats have been screwing up on immigration for decades, and they're showing no signs of changing course now. Their playbook on immigration, with some minor variations, has always gone something like this:

Republicans propose something completely demented and inhumane re. immigration.

Democrats ask for something slightly less demented and inhumane.

Republicans refuse.

Democrats offer to increase border security.

Republicans agree to the slightly less horrifying version of their original plan, plus border security.

Democrats hail this as a political victory, and hint that their willingness to compromise will pave the way for more substantive immigration reforms in the future, which IT NEVER, EVER DOES.

This dreary pantomime has repeated itself over and over throughout the Clinton, Bush, and Obama years. Time after time, Democrats have agreed to more border security and gotten virtually no concessions in return. We see it happening again

ON POLICY POSSIBLE?



now: Trump has proposed to build a gigantic, impenetrable border wall, slash refugee admissions, and revoke protections for the Dreamers, the single-most sympathetic and least controversial group of immigrants in the country. A more absurd and gratuitously cruel set of immigration proposals is hard to imagine. So the Democratic congressional leadership sat down with Trump, schmoozed him a bit over Chinese food, and, in exchange for a vague promise to “enshrine DACA protections in law”—which, taken literally, could well leave the Dreamers still vulnerable to deportation and without any path to citizenship, as is the case under the current DACA executive orders—agreed to *more god-damn border security for the billionth time*. They say they won’t allow “the wall” to be built, of course, but what they *will* end up agreeing to is likely to be even worse: aerial drones and motion

sensors, a more heavily-armed Border Patrol, more and more immigration jails along the border. Hearing Schumer and Pelosi crow about this “deal” as a “major victory”—assuming Trump even follows through with it—is infuriating. To put it in biblical terms, the Democrats are constantly selling their birthright for messes of pottage, and then shamelessly standing in front of reporters in their pottage-smeared bibs, bragging about how they finished *all* of their supper.

But just because things are dismal now doesn’t absolve us of our responsibility to plan for the future. How *would* we change our immigration system, if we ever had a competent Democratic leadership? We hear a lot of talk about “comprehensive immigration reform,” but not much about what the substance of the reforms would be. Historically, “comprehensive immigration

reform” as advertised by Democratic lawmakers, has entailed beefed-up border security, status for Dreamers, and some squishily-defined “amnesty” (which may or may not include a “path to citizenship”) for certain other undocumented people who are currently present in the U.S. Up till this point, we’ve done a remarkable job with the border security piece, and made virtually no progress with the other two goals. It’s very clear that we must decisively abandon this bargaining model. Increased militarization of the border and more enforcement in the interior is in no sense a reasonable trade-off for “amnesty” for undocumented people who entered after an arbitrary cutoff date. That vague promise of “amnesty,” moreover, is just kicking the can down the road. Every single day, hundreds of people are crossing our land borders without documentation; every day, hundreds more are overstaying their visas. That’s the reality. So long as factors like violence, poverty, and family separation exist, people will continue trying to come to the U.S., and everyone who arrives after the amnesty cut-off date will be in the same situation as the undocumented population now. We need real reforms that won’t need to be redone again in ten years, that address the reality of how immigration flows actually work.

To do this, we need to think strategically about the problems in our current system, how to humanely fix those problems, and how to rally voters and legislators to care about the issue. This means getting left-leaning voters to understand why the “enforcement plus amnesty” model of reform, which sounds superficially reasonable to the uninformed, is actually a very bad idea. In a forthcoming series on the *Current Affairs* website, I’ll be putting forth ideas about some concrete immigration policy proposals that I think the left should consider rallying behind. Here, I want to talk more generally about how we might change the public conversation around immigration. My belief is that any immigration strategy that aims to be durable in the long term must make genuine attempts to win over at least some groups of presently immigration-anxious voters. This means taking seriously—up to a point—the instinctive objections that some people have to less restrictive immigration policies. There are, of course, a number of people who object to immigration for purely racist reasons, or because of totally irrational and baseless fears. There are also people who object to immigration for motives that *are* reasonable, or at any rate *sound* reasonable. Some of these people can be swayed, and we must attempt to sway them: not by making political concessions to their fears, but through good old-fashioned persuasion, and appeals to human decency.

GETTING ON THE SAME PAGE:

what is the actual purpose of regulating immigration?

TO MANY PEOPLE, THE IDEA THAT THE GOVERNMENT would regulate immigration is self-evident: *of course* you would need to make sure people weren’t just wandering in and out of the country whenever they pleased! To immigrants and immigration advocates who see on a daily basis what “regulation” looks like up close, feelings about this gener-

al mandate are much more troubled. But it’s certainly true that there’s little point in romanticizing the long millennia of human history when borders were effectively nonexistent. We are a pretty bloody species, and our annals are filled with tales of invasion, and migrations that morphed into invasions, and the subjugation of people with fewer resources, or more scruples, by enemies with bigger weapons who gave fewer damns. At the same time, to the extent that these atrocities happened more frequently in the past, it’s difficult to say that this was *because* there were fewer borders: there were a hell of a lot of other factors in play. In reality, it seems far more plausible that the ability to closely police borders and control migratory flows are a result, not the cause, of a nation’s surplus wealth and internal stability. The intensity of regulation and monitoring of immigration that we see now in the United States is certainly unprecedented in our history.

Nonetheless, borders are not going away anytime in the near future, and so we must deal with them. They are not *all* bad, necessarily. We can posit two reasonably humane purposes for the existence of regulated borders. One is purely administrative: borders define the particular unit of geographical space that a national or subnational government is responsible for, and so it’s important to have some idea of who is living in which territory at any given time. The second purpose is defensive: a border is the logical place where you would repel an aggressor. From these uses, we might posit two compelling reasons to restrict entry across a border. One would be if the state of internal affairs in your territory was so dire that additional population might trigger some kind of societal collapse. Another would be if you had convincing reason to believe that the person seeking to enter your territory intended to physically harm somebody within your borders. Obviously, these are speculative and subjective assessments, and would always need to be argued over; even in the best of all possible immigration systems, civil liberties watchdog groups would be needed to keep an eye on how any standards relating to these two purposes were being applied.

But what’s the point of talking about the purposes of borders in such an idealized and abstract way, you might ask? After all, there’s little immediate prospect of our throwing out our existing immigration system in its entirety and creating a new one from whole cloth. Nonetheless, it’s important to rhetorically highlight the legitimate goals of immigration regulation. The reasons why many people believe that immigration regulation is obviously necessary are tied to fears, which, if they were plausible—and in some contexts they are—*would* be legitimate reasons to restrict immigration. Armed invasions, terrorist massacres, and sudden economic collapse are all very bad outcomes, and if there were ready means of preventing them, any sensible polity would do so. This is why appeals for a “strong border” sound inherently reasonable to many people.

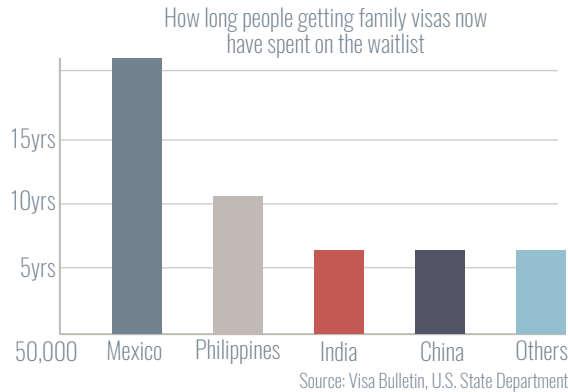
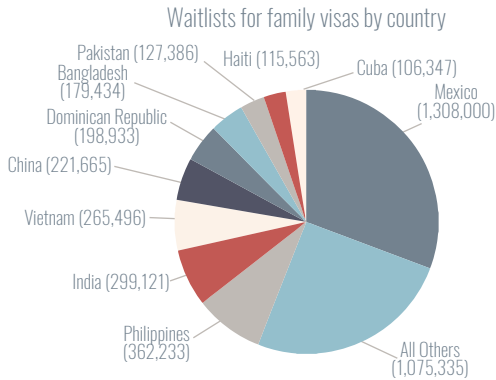
One task of anybody seeking to craft better immigration policies, therefore, is to treat these public fears both seriously and realistically. This will then give us more credibility when we attempt to demonstrate that the vast majority of our current

EVERYTHING IS ARBITRARY

Some people wonder why undocumented people don't just come to the country by the "lawful paths." One reason is that the "lawful paths" are an impossible bureaucratic nightmare, with admission decisions based on entirely arbitrary criteria that have nothing to do with any standard of a person's actual need or "deservingness."

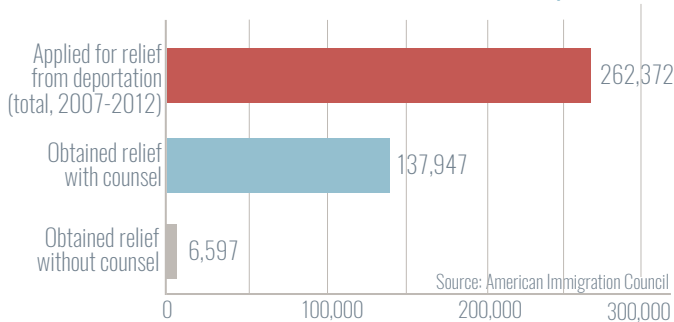
FAMILY VISAS ARE ARBITRARY

Are you a U.S. citizen who wants to bring your family? Hope they're from the right place.



DEPORTATION IS ARBITRARY

What matters most is whether you have a lawyer. Which often depends on where you happen to be.



47%
of non-detained immigrants in removal proceedings had representation in
ATLANTA

87%
of non-detained immigrants in removal proceedings had representation in
NEW YORK

People who are in detention are far less likely to have lawyers than people who aren't detained. And this number varies, too. In El Paso, 22% of the detained had lawyers, while in Tucson, the number was 0%. People in large cities were far more likely to have lawyers than people in small cities. It is very hard to defend this system as fair and rational.

immigration policies are actually geared towards restricting the movements of peaceable people, forcibly removing people from their homes, and ripping people away from their families and shipping them across the globe. When it comes to the thornier problem of how to deal with would-be immigrants who seem as if they might be dangerous, or who, having entered the country, have committed some kind of violent crime, it's much better to direct the debate towards figuring what policies would actually be practically effective in averting future violence—and publicly acknowledging the fact that violence in countries besides the U.S. is something we must care about, from both a moral and a global security perspective—rather than getting sidetracked into metaphysical questions about whether the person has the "right" to be in the U.S. or not.

Building a voter base that sees protections for immigrants as a moral imperative

IMMIGRATION IS AN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT ISSUE TO develop an organizing strategy around, because most immigrants—and certainly the most vulnerable classes of im-

migrants, for whom deportation is a constant threat—cannot vote. Among those immigrants who *can* vote, there's a wide diversity of cultural and class backgrounds, meaning that their opinions on an optimum immigration policy might differ widely. Naturalized citizens who came to the U.S. by "legal" means often have limited sympathy, or even hostility, for immigrants who came here "illegally"; and naturalized citizens may favor increased immigration by certain groups of people (say, white-collar professionals), but not others (say, poor people with limited education). Political commentators often try to use massive, vaguely-delineated census categories like "the Latino vote" as a proxy for the number of people in the U.S. who are likely to treat a liberalized immigration policy as a primary voting concern, but this is a crude approximation at best. (Note, for example, that "the Asian vote" is never used as a proxy for a pro-immigration vote, even though there are just as many immigrants in the U.S. who hail from "Asia" as from "Latin America.") Not all people who self-describe as "Latino" are interested in less restrictive immigration policies—nearly 30% of Latinos voted for Trump, and at least 50% of the Bor-

ASYLUM IS ARBITRARY

You might think whether your asylum petition was granted would mostly depend on whether it met the legal standard. You'd be wrong! A far more important factor is "which court you happen to end up in."

Location of court	% of Asylum Cases Granted
Atlanta	2%
Houston	9%
Dallas	9%
Charlotte	13%
Detroit	14%
San Antonio	22%
Cleveland	24%
Omaha	25%
Los Angeles	27%
Orlando	27%
Miami	32%
Seattle	36%
Denver	46%
Chicago	45%
Arlington	53%
Philadelphia	57%
San Francisco	74%
Phoenix	74%
Boston	75%
New York	84%



der Patrol is Latino—and even among those who are, there’s likely to be further diversity of opinion about which sorts of immigrants these policies should favor.

Non-voting immigrants can, and do, organize on their own behalf, but since they’re not a voting constituency, their ability to apply pressure on their legislators is even more limited than an average citizen’s. Working-class undocumented people theoretically have a lot of power, because so many of them work in areas like agriculture, construction, and domestic labor, where their loss would be quickly felt if they all went on strike—but organizing strikes on a national scale, when people are living under threat of deportation, is extremely hard. Ultimately, if there’s to be any hope of meaningful reform, more voting U.S. citizens—who, at the very least, need not worry about being whisked off to another country at a moment’s notice—must join the cause.

SOW DO WE GET MORE VOTERS TO SUPPORT good immigration policy, or at any rate, not actively oppose it when it’s on the table? I think a big part of our approach ought to focus on working to generate more public empathy for the most vulnerable immigrants: namely, people fleeing violence and extreme poverty, and undocumented people, especially the undocumented poor. Creating empathy isn’t merely a stratagem to get people behind immigration reform in the short term: we must realize that no legal reforms will be durable unless they are accompanied by a real attitudinal shift on immigration. Immigration policies can be changed rapidly, and enforcement can be arbitrary, so immigrants will continue to be easy scapegoats for economic and social ills if we don’t make a serious attempt to push back against the mentality that differentiates people’s worth based on their place of birth. The U.S.’s legally irreproachable prerogative to manage its immigration policies in its own interest has produced morally monstrous results. Our deportation policies have destabilized entire countries, and resulted in the deaths or permanent exile of real human beings, many of whom are the parents, spouses, and children of current inhabitants of the U.S., who may be our neighbors, coworkers, employees, or friends.

Our immigration system is bewilderingly byzantine, and the significant majority of the U.S. population whose lives are not directly impacted by immigration laws know almost nothing about them. My own observation is that many people who are strongly in favor of restrictive immigration policies are unreflective individuals with a strong reverence for rule-following in the abstract. Asked to explain their views, they frequently fall back on stock phrases like “well, we can’t help everyone” or “we’re a nation of laws.” To some extent, this mindset can be disrupted by correcting people’s erroneous assumption that our immigration laws make any damn sense. For example, many Americans mistakenly believe that

it’s possible for an ordinary, law-abiding person to immigrate to the U.S. if they simply fill out the correct paperwork, or that undocumented people apprehended in the U.S. can avoid deportation by showing good character. One highly-circulated news story in the wake of the 2016 election described the deportation of an undocumented immigrant named Roberto Bernstein, whose U.S. citizen wife and friends had voted for Trump, and were shocked when Roberto was subsequently targeted by ICE. These are people who might have been persuaded to vote differently if they had had a better command of the facts, if they had realized that there is very little mercy in the law for undocumented people, no matter how good a husband you are, or how much your children love you, or how long you’ve held down your job.

FOR OTHER PEOPLE, HOWEVER, WHO HAVE LITTLE direct contact with immigrants, these kinds of facts won’t have much personal context and are less likely to be compelling. Somehow, we need to find ways to make the struggles faced by immigrants feel *real* to non-immigrants. Creating relationships within communities between immigrants and non-immigrants can be effective. I’ve known several quite conservative people to take a sharp left turn on immigration because they lived and worked closely with undocumented people who became their good friends. For people who are already vaguely-disposed to favor less-restrictive immigration policies, but simply haven’t given the issue very much thought, they are likely to need even less of a nudge. Figuring out how to foster more face-to-face interactions between immigrants and non-immigrants is something that can be done on a municipal, even a neighborhood level; good strategies are best worked out by people operating on a local scale who know their neighbors and what appeals they are likely to respond to.

Film and narrative are also meaningful ways to create emotional engagement. Most people have hearts that can be touched, especially where, say, children are concerned. My feeling about left rhetoric in general is that we need to talk about children a lot more—the sooner everyone drops the hip cynical posery and goes into full-throated Save The Children mode, the better. We should all be yammering ceaselessly about children separated from their parents by deportation policies, children being torn from their homes and sent to countries they don’t even remember, children being picked up at the border and locked in detention centers, children who are trapped in violent homes while their relatives in the U.S. desperately try to send for them. There appears to be a real pessimism these days about our ability to change each other’s minds. But I don’t think we’re trying very hard, honestly. Facts certainly have an important place; but narrative and emotion are equally important. Most people want to think of themselves as good people. The trick is getting them to realize that a good person *could not do otherwise* than care about the plight of vulnerable immigrants.

ADDRESSING ECONOMIC FEARS ABOUT IMMIGRATION: Building solidarity between the citizen and undocumented working classes

THE DIVISION BETWEEN DOCUMENTED AND undocumented laborers has been a huge problem for the left historically, and, I would argue, our failure to address the inseparability of labor and immigration policy—which are certainly inextricably linked in the minds of voters and in the rhetoric of savvy political operators—is one of the main reasons why the left is floundering pathetically even against a fragmented and morally bankrupt right. The fact is, there will never be decent jobs with robust worker protections while there is an undocumented “underclass” that employers can exploit under threat of deportation. It is also true that, at present, many of the economic labors that are most indispensable to our daily lives—the harvesting and distribution of food, the building of physical structures, the care of our children and elderly—are performed disproportionately by undocumented people (and a smaller number of seasonal, “low-skill” guest workers, who, though they are in the country on legal visas, are tied to one employer and have limited ability to seek redress for workplace abuses). If they were all suddenly to disappear, it’s not at all clear who would replace them.

Wage protections and security from deportation for undocumented people must be part of any credible left economic strategy. Lately, it’s been fashionable to make appeals to the macro-level economic benefits created by immigration, but I believe this is a mistaken approach. First, it’s far from clear that the “growth” supposedly generated by immigration is actually benefiting workers and their families. Second, it’s not effective, inasmuch as anybody who has a friend or family member who’s been laid off from a construction job isn’t going to care whether immigration benefits the economy *in general*. Third, the logical outcome of this sort of GDP-based calculus is the “points-based” immigration system that Trump is currently touting, where people are only permitted to immigrate if they are deemed likely to boost the U.S. economy in specific ways. This inherently leaves out vast swathes of people—especially poor people—who have very good reasons for wanting to immigrate.

A better argument is to emphasize the fact that workers, documented and undocumented, are vulnerable to exploitation; and that the best way to prevent undocumented workers from undercutting wages or working conditions isn’t by deporting them all en masse, but by shielding them from deportation and holding employers accountable for violating their rights. This kind of organizing is certainly occurring on a local scale in many places, but it hasn’t made much of an appearance in Democratic national rhetoric. The connection between the egregious level of exploitation suffered by undocumented and guest workers, and the lack of consistent protections for documented workers, must be made clear and explicit. If all workers cannot bargain together, because some of them live in fear of deportation, then there will never be decent work. Even if there’s no clear statistical con-

nection between amount of immigration and layoffs, even if the number of workers who directly “lose their job” to immigrants are few, even if it’s been a long time since native-born Americans have done the exact kind of work that undocumented people have been forced into, I don’t think any of that matters. That an artificial division in the working class has been created by immigration status is very clear, and that this division would inhibit organizing is intuitively obvious.

In short, I think the left’s ability to push for meaningful immigration reform is entirely contingent on their ability to rebuild credibility with the poor and the working class. It’s crucial to explode, decisively, the right-wing narrative that immigration *per se* hurts native-born workers. This is important not just because the working class was part of the swing vote in the last election: after all, most Trump voters were middle- and upper-class people. But many of those upper- and middle-class people no doubt convinced themselves that they were white-knighting for the working class by opposing immigration, and we must do our best to deprive them utterly of that veneer for indulging their prejudices.

Additionally, while appeals to self-interest and class solidarity are important here, they won’t be effective unless they’re coupled with the fraternal, empathy-building approach. If we appeal to self-interest alone, there will always be people ready to point out that tougher immigration enforcement and an impenetrable border wall is an alternative way to prevent immigrants from undercutting native wages, one which also satisfies the American public’s inconsistent but weirdly intense appetite for Making Sure The Rules Are Followed. I often hear people on the left argue against The Wall or mass deportation with lines like “well, it would be stupidly expensive to deport *all* the undocumented immigrants” or “well, it would be virtually impossible to *completely secure* the *entire border*.” But if some monster like Trump adviser Kris Kobach ever runs for president—and given his gubernatorial ambitions and his impressively shiny Colgate smile, I’d say that could be in the cards—he’s going to characterize that deportation task force as an investment that will put money back in the pockets of American workers. Furthermore, I have no doubt he’ll find ways to make crossing the border horrifically difficult and high-risk, in a way that does indeed deter migration. Clearing the land of unauthorized immigrants would be difficult, to be sure, but I wouldn’t say it’s impossible for a sufficiently determined xenophobe. We should emphasize instead that immigrants are real people, and that separating them from their families or consigning them to lives of terror and insecurity is morally wrong.

ADDRESSING VIOLENCE-BASED FEARS ABOUT IMMIGRATION: Proactively explaining violence to the public and directing sympathy towards all its victims

AMERICANS TEND TO HAVE A LOT OF ANXIETY centered around immigration and violence. This takes three main forms: the fear of violence and organized crime spilling over the U.S.-Mexico border, the fear of terrorist attacks by Mus-



lim immigrants, and the more generalized fear of falling victim to a violent crime committed by “someone who shouldn’t even be here.” All of these fears were highlighted extensively over the course of Trump’s campaign, and play a big behind-the-scenes role in his fluctuating policy positions on immigration. Chief of Staff John Kelly, for example, evidently believes that Mexico is on the verge of state collapse, and that we must clamp down on the southern border to avoid collateral damage.

I understand immigration activists’ desire to debunk inaccurate or deemphasize incidental connections between immigration and violence in the public imagination, given that the right is actively spreading hysterical misinformation on the subject. However, in writing off people’s fears that immigration could lead to violence as self-evidently ludicrous, I worry that the left actually makes the right’s claims seem *more* credible. Take Trump’s infamous reference to “bad hombres” while on the campaign trail. A lot of left-leaning people sniggered at this remark as ridiculous: they dismissed it as fear-mongering about immigrants generally, and made lots of “bad ombre” memes. And of course, the term “bad hombres” is absurd and racist, inasmuch as it suggests a connection between speaking Spanish and committing crimes. At the same time—and this is a context of which Trump’s supporters are abundantly aware—there are, in fact, incredibly violent criminal groups actively vying for territory along the southern border. This reality should concern us, too, because

it’s a humanitarian emergency right on our doorstep that’s going almost completely unaddressed.

IN THE MEXICAN BORDER TOWNS OF REYNOSA, NUEVO Laredo, and Matamoros, for example, death rates have spiked sharply this year, and Mexican journalists say that the area is more dangerous now than they’ve ever seen it. Whole families are massacred by cartels, down to little children, as acts of vengeance and as warnings to their enemies. A lot of the liberals I talk to seem to know almost nothing about this situation: after all, the *New York Times* isn’t running very many front-page stories about it. But you know who *does* have an on-site journalist down at the border, churning out blood-spattered reportage on a daily basis? *Fucking Breitbart News*. Conservatives know *all about* the situation on the border—framed within a very specific anti-immigration narrative, of course—because they see stories about it constantly. If *Breitbart* is reporting regularly on border happenings, trying to reinforce the “Mexicans = murderers” narrative, then the *NYT* should be reporting on it just as frequently, talking about the refugees this latest wave of cartel infighting is creating. We can point out who is actually suffering the most from this violence—not Americans, but Mexican residents and migrants trying to pass through Mexico—and demand that our government do more to protect people who need it.

FIVE IMPROVEMENTS TO U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICY

that the left should consider

1 GUARANTEED LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR IMMIGRANTS

If an immigrant is in danger of being deported, they should be guaranteed a lawyer, just like somebody in criminal proceedings.

2 INCREASED REFUGEE ADMISSIONS

In addition to the refugees that are resettled by the federal government annually, states, cities, organizations, and individuals should be allowed to sponsor additional refugees if they choose. The U.S. should extend legal protection to people fleeing violence who are not covered under existing asylum law.

3 DECRIMINALIZING IMMIGRATION OFFENSES

Immigrants who pose no risk to public safety should never be detained, and deportation should not be a default consequence for lack of proper documentation. People without current immigration status should be able to pay a fine and adjust their status without leaving the country.

4 EGALITARIAN ALLOTMENT OF VISAS

There should be no annual cap on immigrant visas for family members of U.S. residents. Other immigrant and non-immigrant visas should be condensed into a small number of general categories—for which individuals of many wealth and educational backgrounds are eligible—and issued by lottery, without regard to nationality.

5 MORE FLEXIBLE WORK AUTHORIZATION

Individuals from neighboring countries should be able to easily obtain work authorization from the U.S. government, with the ability to move freely between employers and travel back and forth across the border.

The situation is similar when it comes to immigrants fleeing violence in Syria, and other places where ISIS and ideological-similar groups are active. I think the only tactic that stands a chance of overcoming people's fears about extremist violence by Muslim immigrants is building up sympathy for victims of violence and oppression in these countries, and trying to convince Americans that the ever-present risk of terrorism is small, relative to the incredible suffering these refugees are facing. In our desire to convince people they're actually *wrong* to be afraid of terrorism (as opposed to convincing people that they need to *conquer* their fear of terrorism to serve a greater moral good), we sometimes resort to stupidly counterproductive arguments. One line I used to hear a lot was, "Don't be scared of refugees! After all, the people who perpetrated 9/11 entered the U.S. *legally, on tourist and business visas!*" Nice work, guys, you just made a great argument for the Muslim Ban. With reference to incidents like the Boston Marathon bombing and the Orlando nightclub shooting, there were a number of popular Facebook posts saying things like, "Well, this is no reason to be scared of immigrants, because these terrorists were *American citizens!*" That's hardly the argumentative slam-dunk people seem to think it is. Because the next question is always, well, were they native-born or naturalized American citizens? And if they're native-born, were their *parents* immigrants? You think what your audience is hearing is, "Oh, immigrants aren't the problem," but what they're *actually* hearing is, "Oh no, we can't give these people citizenship! They're dangerous down to the third generation!"

The left has, in recent years, also relied very heavily on statistics purporting to show that immigrants commit crimes at a lower rate than native-born people. I don't think this is *completely* useless, inasmuch as it cuts against a pernicious stereotype that immigrants are naturally predisposed to crime; but it could get us into trouble down the road. First of all, there is nothing innate about "immigrants"—a gigantic and varied class of individuals—that makes them less likely to commit crimes than "native-born Americans." We could easily see that convenient statistic flip at any time, for any number of random factors. Secondly, supposing somebody breaks down the crime statistics based on race, ethnicity, religion, or type of crime, and finds out that certain immigrant populations are over-represented? Do we really want to be implicitly encouraging demographic screenings for criminality? I think not.

I don't think there's any foolproof strategy for addressing these problems, but my general instinct is that we need better reporting and storytelling about the violence along our southern border and in refugee-producing countries, emphasizing the devastating impact that it has on the people who are directly affected by it, and presenting solutions for better protecting those people. (Babies, God damn it! I want to see more pictures of babies!) Especially when it comes to the violence on our southern border, we need to do a better job explaining how our militarization of the border has significantly contributed to the bloodbath we're currently seeing. The overwhelming majority

of people who cross the border unauthorized do so for the purpose of finding work or joining their families, but because we police these peaceable crossings so fiercely, this creates strong incentives for violent groups to battle for control over migration routes, hold migrants for ransom, and force them to pay off cartel-approved smugglers. Our drug policies also fuel criminal networks, of course, but the fact that we devote so many enforcement resources not just to stopping the entry of suspected cartel operatives and of arguably dangerous contraband, but also to stopping ordinary people who are carrying absolutely nothing, has escalated violence considerably.

On a foreign policy level, we need to take violence reduction in sending countries more seriously. At this point, there's only so much we can do in places like Syria, but in countries closer to home, where the situation is less far-gone, we likely have more options. So far, most of our assistance has taken the form of sending big gobs of money (and, occasionally, Rudy Giuliani) to Mexico and Central America to help them further militarize their police forces, but—shockingly—this has mostly served to make things worse. In addition to treating the mass migration from high-violence regions as the serious refugee crisis it is, we also need to invest significant diplomatic energy towards fostering dialogue and brokering peace deals between regional actors, including between governments and criminal organizations like the cartels and the *maras*. Nobody wants to take this step, because supposedly, sitting down and talking with criminal groups gives them “legitimacy.” But these groups are already very, very legitimate to the people who live under their control, and getting atrocities to cease must be our immediate goal, above all else.

THE QUESTION OF HOW TO DEAL WITH immigrants who commit violent crimes in the U.S. is an especially hard one. The “felons not families” rhetoric favored by the Democratic Party is bad for several reasons, one of which is that, under immigration law, the definition of an “aggravated felony” that will make a person ineligible for discretionary relief from deportation is wildly over-inclusive, encompassing everything from violent crimes like murder to non-violent crimes like drug offenses and check-forging. The law takes no cognizance of the person's age (if they were tried as an adult) at the time when the crime was committed, whether they already served their prison sentence before they were apprehended by immigration, and whether they've been otherwise rehabilitated in society.

The other reason why “felons not families” is bad is because, in the case of immigrants who *have* recently committed violent crimes, deportation will serve neither to aid their rehabilitation *or* keep other potential victims safe, since the person may go on to commit similar acts of violence against people in the designated country of deportation. For this reason, I think that violent criminals shouldn't be deported, but I recognize that it will probably be near-impossible to persuade the general public of this—and admittedly, given that our own criminal justice sys-

tem is so dysfunctional, it's not as if staying in the U.S. is likely to be a *significantly* more humane option as far as the criminals themselves are concerned. At the very least, if deportation is still on the table for violent offenders—because I think it should decidedly be *off* the table for everyone else—it should be explicitly imposed as a criminal punishment at sentencing. Right now, it's considered a “civil” consequence of violating immigration law, and can be executed years after the offense, sometimes when a person has already long since served their jail time.

PROSPECTS FOR REFORMING OUR IMMIGRATION system have been gloomy for a long time, and aren't showing signs of getting better anytime soon. But there is a bit of a silver lining. Under the Trump presidency, the general population of left-leaning people seem to care about immigration a lot more than they used to. Some of this outrage, it seems, is driven more by a personal dislike of Trump and his rhetorically uglier tone on immigration, rather than a substantive engagement on immigration issues—after all, Obama deported large numbers of people, and presided over a massive expansion of the immigration detention system that made the imprisonment even of asylum-seeking toddlers a matter of procedural course, but Obama was so damn *likeable* that most Democrats didn't care very much. But I think there is a real opportunity, potentially, to capitalize on this wave of public sentiment and push for Democratic candidates to back more ambitious immigration reforms, much as they've begun to do with single-payer healthcare and minimum wage. If we have to endure three (or seven) more years of Trump, we should at least move to take advantage of the publicity he brings to immigration issues, and the extent to which his uncensored remarks reveal the deep ugliness of our current system, in a way that a more suave and traditional politician would likely manage to avoid.

But on the left, we also need to be ideologically bold, and work to remind each other of our moral responsibilities. It is not enough to have an insular domestic policy that does not take cognizance of the way U.S. actions affect other parts of the world. Immigration exemplifies this, by bringing the wider world's problems—many of which we ourselves actively contribute to, others of which we have no self-interest in alleviating—right into our communities. The Sanders campaign showed that there's scope for an inclusive, principled left-wing populism to achieve political success in the U.S. But it's worth pointing out that the weakest parts of the Sanders campaign were immigration and foreign policy. The new populist strain of the right is, perhaps, the most dangerous element of the American political scene, because it manages to combine real grievances and unexamined contradictions in American politics with a particular kind of regressive racial scapegoating. We need to do a lot better going forward, and not avoid taking a firm stand on protecting immigrants out of fear of alienating voters, or out of a desire to more easily win other battles. ♦

IS THE STUPIDITY OF OUR AGE UNIQUE?

By Brianna Rennix & Nathan J. Robinson



BROADLY SPEAKING, THERE ARE TWO POPULAR views of human history. One view is that our ancestors were ignorant, fearful, and credulous. Then we discovered science, and medicine, and birth control, and since then, our society has gradually become more humane. The other view is that the human race used to be dignified, spiritually enlightened, and fully-integrated within our communities and our natural environment. Increasingly, however, in the unnatural pressure-cooker of modernization, we are all becoming more and more depressed and selfish. Among academic historians, these two views are known as the “Everything Is Fantastic Nowadays!” and the “Everything is Garbage Nowadays!” schools of thought, respectively.

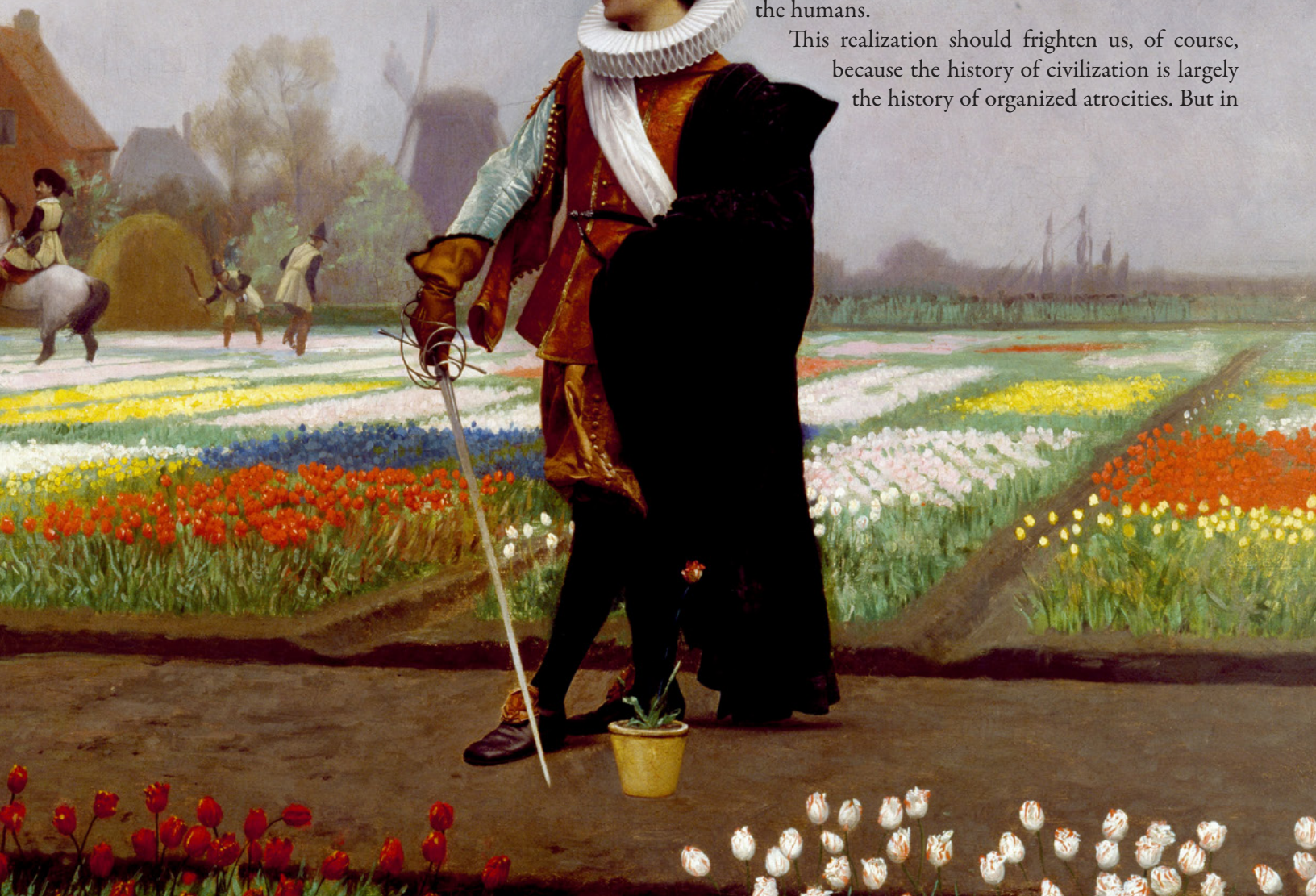
This worldview split does not divvy up along clear political lines. In a gathering of miscellaneous lefties, if you were to expound on the virtues of a kinder, simpler, pre-industrial past, it’s a toss-up whether you’d be casually ID’d as a cooperative agrarian socialist or denounced as a crypto-fascist. Likewise, if you were to make an impassioned plea for the importance of scientific knowledge and its

ability to solve certain kinds of human problems, you might be hailed as a free-thinker, or you might be written off as a liberal technocrat. It’s all very confusing.

Current Affairs is not here to adjudicate whether the past was good or bad. In our view, the past had many things going for it. There were more trees and animals, the buildings were more attractive, old people weren’t put into containment silos, and everybody got more exercise (albeit often via war). At the same time, of course, the past was a fucking nightmare. Lots of people died from infection, childbirth, or literally pooping themselves to death. Murder was much more readily accepted as a reasonable form of dispute resolution. The weak were trampled upon in proportionally greater numbers. People had to farm all the damn time, regardless of whether they enjoyed manual labor, and even if they were scared of earthworms.

One thing we *can* say with reasonable confidence, however, is that while the ways human beings have shaped their environments have changed over time, human beings themselves, with minor variations, have *always been just the same*. We are the blundering, dyspeptic, misbegotten wretches that our forefathers were. The décor changes, but the humans remain the humans.

This realization should frighten us, of course, because the history of civilization is largely the history of organized atrocities. But in



another sense, it should also encourage us. There is a prevailing, pessimistic view—held by impatient, forward-looking futurists and nostalgic traditionalists alike—that the people of the 21st century are uncommonly stupid. If we don't keep the wheels of scientific and educational progress rolling—or, alternatively, if we don't return to the golden age when People Knew How To Think—the human race is doomed, they say. Here comes the “idiocracy”: we are drifting toward an eternity of pudgy torpor, distracted by useless plastic whirligigs and reality television. It is the Age of the Fidget Spinner. Our brains have turned to soft cheese, our culture is decadent and superficial.

This, as it turns out, is all nonsense. There seems to be a vague notion that people used to sit around making star charts and reading edifying books until somebody invented *video games* and *reality television*. But the truth is that people of all classes and educational levels have always been highly susceptible to bullshit. They have always enjoyed stupid pastimes and spent money on useless items. They have always talked trash about each other, and taken delight in one another's misfortunes. They have always been celebrity-obsessed. They have always sought unsavory outlets for their sexual and violent fantasies. Is any of this laudable? Not especially. But is any of it *new*? Not at all. Nor does our history suggest that these facts of human nature are ever likely to change. The most we can do is just continue to muddle through, and try, day to day, to be the least ghastly versions of ourselves we can.

Ah, but you don't *believe us!* Then let us take a peek into the historical offal bucket and see what our predecessors were up to.



VIOLENCE AS ENTERTAINMENT

We hear constantly that people these days are Increasingly Desensitized To Violence. Now, don't get us wrong: treating violence as a form of entertainment is, at best, morally dubious. Just because there isn't empirical evidence to suggest that watching *Saw* or playing *Saints Row* turns preteens into spree killers doesn't mean that these things encourage us to be our kindest, gentlest selves, either. Small children are probably not unaffected by using their CGI avatars

to hack sex workers to death. Torture flicks are grotesque, and likely deaden people's ability to empathize with the real suffering they see on the news. Laughing when people are injured or humiliated in YouTube videos or reality TV shows is sociopathic and creepy. None of these things are *good*, and our society would undoubtedly be better off without them.

Nonetheless, our era is really no more or less fixated on violence than previous ones. From folk music and fairytales (which are just about as depraved, sex-and-violence-wise, as anything modern media has on offer) to cockfighting and gladiatorial games, humans have been drawn to mindlessly violent forms of entertainment since the dawn of time. Public executions were not only well-attended in the early modern period, but did a roaring trade in souvenirs, including mocking or sentimental broadsheet ballads about the doomed prisoners. “Punch & Judy” shows, which have been around for about 400 years, are domestic-violence setpieces in which a married couple batters each other mercilessly for any god-damn reason the puppeteer can think of. If you think the present popularity of zombie films and *Grand Theft Auto* is disturbing, remember that people literally used to entertain themselves by watching the torture of live badgers.

NEUROSES AND DELUSIONS

What with capitalist oppression, big pharma, and mommy message boards, it is said that we now live in an unusually fearful and hypochondriacal age. People are sug-



gestible, and eager to live up to societal expectations, and the strain of modern life is making them lash out in bizarre ways. Cell phones will give you brain cancer! Vaccines will give you autism! Every other physical substance known to man will give you asthma, allergies, and/or ADHD! Everybody nowadays thinks they (or their children) have some devastating, incurable ailment, thanks to amateur WebMD sleuthing, gullibility, and a growing trend towards neurotic self-absorption.

Alas, we really can't pin this one on the internet, because weird mass delusions and medical anxieties are apparently just Something We Do as a species. For example: between the 14th and 17th centuries, there were many recorded instances of something called Dancing Mania, where mobs



of people were suddenly overcome by the uncontrollable urge to dance for hours at a time, sometimes until they broke their ribs and died. (The Strasbourg Dancing Plague of 1518 was said to have killed fifteen people a day.) Or take the strange outbreak of cat-like meowing amongst a convent of nuns in 19th-century France, which only ceased when the police appeared on the scene and thrashed the nuns into submission. In the late medieval and early modern period, a fashionable neurosis amongst the wealthy was called The Glass Delusion: its most famous sufferer was Charles VI, king of France from 1368 to 1422, who believed that his entire body was made of glass, and wore special clothes to prevent himself from being shattered. One 17th-century Venetian sufferer, meanwhile, was so convinced that his arse was made of glass that he refused to sit down "lest he should have broken his crackling hinderparts." As hysterias go, our era actually seems comparatively tame.

CELEBRITY OBSESSIONS

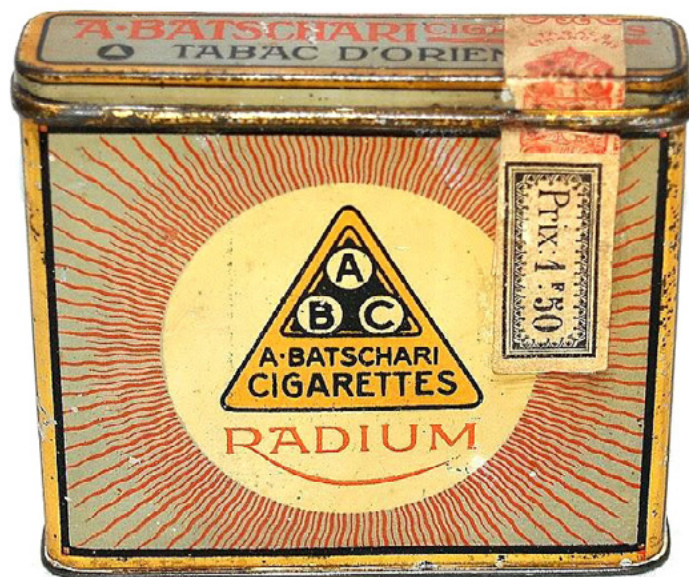
Oh God, you think people are into celebrities *now*? Athletes at the original Olympic Games in 700 BC used to rub themselves down with olive oil and then, after the day's competition, scrape the disgusting residue off their bodies and sell it to their adoring fans. Poetry groupies in the early

nineteenth century were so obsessed with Lord Byron that the term "Byromania" was coined; and the disquieting rate of mortality among Romantic poets, far from discouraging the public, merely gave rise to weird tuberculosis-inspired fashions designed to make the wearer appear tantalizingly close to death. Later in the century, when the widely-adored Princess Alexandra of Denmark developed a slight limp after a bout of rheumatic fever, her fans took to wearing mismatched shoes and walking with canes to emulate her trademark walk.

HEALTH AND DIET CRAZES

Our age is sometimes mocked for its spirited embrace of the organic and gluten-free, or its excessive medication. But prior times had their own mad ideas about health. A Victorian health food proponent named Horace Fletcher pioneered "Fletcherism," which encouraged people to chew their food 100 times before swallowing it. Fletcher was nicknamed "The Great Masticator" and declared that "Nature will castigate those who don't masticate." Fletcher's teachings were embraced by figures from Upton Sinclair to John D. Rockefeller, and even Franz Kafka is alleged to have given it a try.

At least Fletcherism was harmless, if a bit disgusting. More horrifying was the "Voronoff Technique" pushed by French surgeon Serge Voronoff in the 1920s and 30s. The technique involved grafting pieces of monkey tissue onto men's testicles, which was alleged to increase their sexual prowess. Many millionaires underwent Voronoff's procedure, having pieces of monkeys' reproductive parts attached to their own. During the Golden Age of Snake Oil Products, all kinds of ordinary items were billed as having medicinal properties. Everyday table salt was bottled and sold as "Effervescent Brain Salt." And in the opening decades of the 20th century, people became



ANSWERS TO REEF PUZZLE

p. 52-53

WHAT'S WRONG:

1. The rainbow trout is not native to the Great Barrier Reef
2. The trigger fish rarely grows to the exaggerated size depicted here
3. The pink coloration on the backs of the sea turtles is not an accurate depiction of their natural hue
4. The coral trout's tail fin should be more fan-like
5. That type of plastic bag is generally printed with the common phrase "Thank You for Shopping With Us!"

convinced that radium was good for you, putting it everywhere: in their hot chocolate, in their swimming pools, and up their butts. Yes, the Radium Suppository was a real product.

ABSURD FADS

It's true that in the last few decades, humans have indulged in some senseless fads, from the Beanie Baby craze of the late 90s to the brief popularity of "Silly Bandz" a few years ago. Again, though, nothing new. Think of how bizarre it is that wigs caught on. There was a long period of time before everyone started wearing powdered wigs. Then, in the late 17th century, people started

to wear elaborate powdered wigs. They did so for over a hundred years. And then they stopped. Nobody ever gave a justification for it. It just happened.

Other fads were equally bizarre. People collected religious relics with unusual zeal, and a piece of a saint was a prized possession. (One especially rare and treasured relic was the "Holy Prepuce," alleged to be a piece of Jesus' foreskin.) A kaleidoscope craze swept Victorian England, and for a time you couldn't walk through the streets of London without seeing people with kaleidoscopes held to their eyes. And, of course, we can't forget the Dutch tulip bubble of the 17th century, when a collective obsession with tulips suddenly drove the prices sky-high.

Or consider ring-turning. From NPR:

New York, according to a New York newspaper story reprinted in many papers — including the Cincinnati Enquirer on Oct. 21, 1893 — young women in offices were acting mysteriously by reaching out to men they met and turning the rings on their fingers. "It's the craziest thing you ever heard of," one office worker told a reporter. "The idea is this: If a young lady meets a young man with a ring on his finger, she is to turn the ring two or three times. Then with another man the same thing, and so on until she has turned rings to the extent of about 24 times. Then the next thing to do is to look for a married person, male

TIMELINE OF LUDICROUS HUMAN ENDEAVOR

FOR CENTURIES, PENITENTS WEAR HAIRSHIRTS, PUNISHING THEMSELVES WITH DELIBERATELY UNCOMFORTABLE DAYWEAR



1300



MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS SOMETIMES FEATURED OBSCENE MARGINALIA SUCH AS THIS NUN GATHERING PENISES FROM A TREE

1600

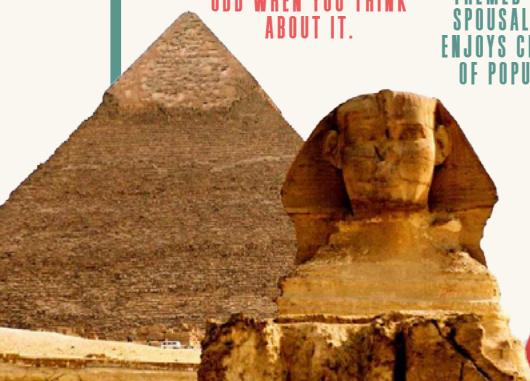


PEOPLE HAVE WORN SOME TRULY EXTRAORDINARY THINGS ON THEIR HEADS

1700

AGE OF WIGS

HONESTLY, BUILDING PYRAMIDS IS KIND OF ODD WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT.

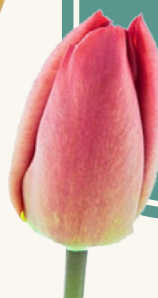


PUNCH & JUDY, A PUPPET SHOW THEMED AROUND SPOUSAL ABUSE, ENJOYS CENTURIES OF POPULARITY



TULIP MANIA

In the Netherlands during the 1630s, people suddenly became obsessed with tulips, causing the price to skyrocket to the point where a single tulip bulb was worth more than ten times the annual income of a skilled worker. Of course, the tulip bubble could not last, and many investors were ruined when people finally realized that a tulip should not be worth more than a house. On pages 46-47, we can see Dutch soldiers trampling fields of tulips in an effort to restrict the supply and increase the price.



or female, wearing a marriage ring. This ring she is to turn twice, and the next man she shakes hands with will be her husband." The craze was such a time suck at one particular New York establishment that management was forced to post a warning: "Any employee caught practicing the ring turning business will be immediately discharged." A business owner said: "The time we have lost through it would amount to days."

THE COMMENTS SECTION

Everyone knows that online comments sections are a wasteland and that everything said in them is idiotic. But the lowest common denominator has been pretty low for a long time. From the preserved graffiti on Pompeii's bathrooms, we know that people have enjoyed trash-talking, poop jokes, and bragging about their sexual prowess for millennia. Some sample quotes from the bathroom walls of ancient Rome:

Secundus defecated here

Defecator, may everything turn out okay so that you can leave this place

The one who buggers a fire burns his penis

Weep, you girls. My penis has given you up. Now it penetrates men's behinds. Goodbye, wondrous femininity!

Amplificatus, I know that Icarus is buggering you.

One can see all of this as either encouraging or discouraging. On the one hand, over thousands of years, we haven't really gotten any worse. On the other, we haven't gotten much better either, even as the faces of the individual celebrities have changed and the kaleidoscopes have been replaced with Silly Bandz or fidget spinners. You can either take comfort in or be embarrassed by the durability of human ludicrousness. ♦

SO MUCH PHRENOLOGY

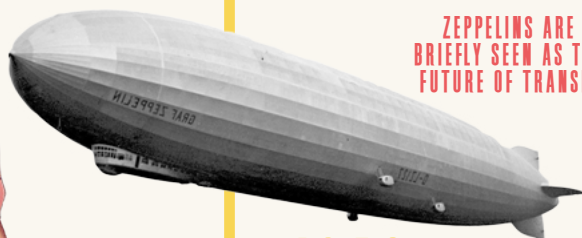
1800



AGE OF

1940

1960



ZEPPELINS ARE BRIEFLY SEEN AS THE FUTURE OF TRANSIT

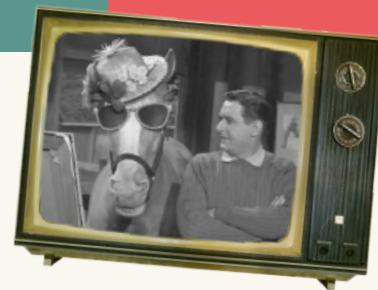


THE HISTORY OF BRITISH PEOPLE IS THE HISTORY OF SILLINESS

THE AMOUNT OF HUMAN ENERGY THAT HAS BEEN SPENT PLAYING GOLF IS ASTONISHING



THIS WOMAN IS WEARING A DEAD BIRD ON HER HEAD



MR. ED, A SITCOM ABOUT A TALKING HORSE, IS WATCHED BY MILLIONS.

CAN YOU SPOT WHAT'S
WRONG WITH THE

GREAT BARRIER REEF?

Things are not quite right in the
Great Barrier Reef. There are five
things wrong in this picture.
Can you spot what they are?







THE PUBLIC VILLAGE

Relieving Parenthood's Burdens

by Vanessa A. Bee

NOW THAT MY MOTHER IS DEEP IN THAT phase of her life where every one of our meetings concludes with an inquiry regarding my womb's reproductive intentions, I often think of the old adage that "it takes a village to raise a child." Contemplating the possibility of future children, I consider the fact my mother had already had me by the time she was my age. I also consider the fact that I quite like children: their sense of wonder, their earnest hopefulness, their sharp-tongued wit, their obliviousness to Twitter. But then I recall the stark reality: that growing wealth and income inequality has turned the "village"—now a network of low-waged (or sometimes unpaid) nannies, au-pairs, tutors, chauffeurs, and other "help"—into an unrecognizable, privatized luxury for the rich. If I were to have a child today, I would find myself in the shoes of most parents in America, for whom there is no village. Just a nuclear family, if you can hold it together, and an unfair economy in the backdrop.

The richest 10% of people have spent the last forty years hoarding 75% of gains in the U.S. economy. For the rest of us, the apex of American capitalism has mostly taken the form of losses: stagnant wages, predatory financialization, eroded labor power and job guarantees, burst housing bubbles, too-damn-high rents, and a hollowed safety net. Even though our economy benefits from population growth, the state continues to confine the costs of care

to nuclear families and the private sector. This toxic dynamic is straining our society's ability to rear its children. To borrow the words of Nancy Fraser, the democratic-socialist and feminist philosopher, our society is facing a crisis of care. And it is making American parents absolutely miserable.

This is not a hyperbole. As the *New York Times* enjoys reporting with regularity, a trifecta of anxiety, financial, and emotional drain have led to a "happiness gap" between American parents and non-parents, as well as between American and European parents. As a recent study out of the University of Texas makes clear, these significant differences between the U.S. and Europe are not explained by something inherent in our soil's composition (notwithstanding our occasional water poisoning crises). Instead, the greatest predictor of parental happiness is the existence of policies that make it "less stressful and less costly to combine childrearing with paid work." Simply put: European governments help their folks, while the United States hangs its own out to dry.

Today, most American parents work. Specifically, nearly half of two-parent families include both parents working full-time, and only a quarter are supported by a stay-at-home mother. In cisgender, heterosexual couples, both parents acutely feel the pressures of balancing work and family. But mothers consistently report bearing the brunt of domestic and caregiving duties. Mothers also report greater rates of feeling rushed; of finding parenting stressful; of feeling the impact on their careers; of finding work-life balancing difficult. One can only imagine how much more intense

LEFT: Each year, parents come to the pier to return inconvenient children to the stork, who carries them to the nearest public boarding school to be raised in a friendly and supportive environment.

these burdens can be on single-parent households, or where one of two parents has a severe handicap. A true village, a socialized one, could go a long way towards closing the Happiness Gap—not only between parents and non-parents, but also between co-parents.

Despite the fact that it is 2017, neither parental leave nor universal childcare is a given in the United States. This is baffling, considering that both family policies enjoy wide support from the American public. In most places, hardworking families must renounce income during the critical weeks following and sometimes preceding a new child's arrival. The federal government, also the single largest employer in the nation, leads the way by depriving its two-million employees of paid parental leave. The private sector, including behemoths like Wal-Mart, follow suit in its treatment of its lower-wage workforce. Even in the handful of progressive enclaves in the U.S. where the Left has registered wins, the outlook is sobering. Compared to the 45 weeks of leave available to Norwegian mothers, for instance, New York's "progressive" 12 weeks feel paltry.

In the struggle for free universal childcare, we've actually *regressed* since World War II. For a brief three years, Congress funded an expansive childcare program through a 1940s wartime law called the Lanham Act. With large segments of the male population drafted away, the state tapped women to sustain production at home. In exchange, it offered affordable relief from caregiving duties if the mothers could meet the low eligibility bar: working in a community contributing to the war effort, and paying of a small flat fee under 75 cents per day. The school formats and hours varied by locality but, in some places, ran 24/7 to accommodate round-the-clock work schedules. The scheme worked. For the first time in the country's history, married women even surpassed single women in the labor force. By the time the war wound down, the program had become so popular that protests broke out around the country when Congress began closing facilities.

Since then, the federal government has failed to offer any childcare programs anywhere near as generous as those created by the Lanham Act. Through the Head Start program launched in the 1960s, the federal government has tried to improve access to childcare. But with a limited number of slots available and eligibility to participate restricted by income, the program is even further removed from a universal ideal. Nor have the 50 states sought to create any better childcare options. Jurisdictions that provide universal free preschool remain the exception; meanwhile, daycare expenses continue to devour family budgets in large metropolitan areas. In San Francisco, New York City, and Boston, childcare costs easily rival already-exorbitant housing costs. For households of modest means, this often means no assistance in figuring out what to do with their children during the day. Given all of this, frankly, it's a wonder American parents do not report even higher rates of dissatisfaction.

Then there's the issue of after-school and evenings. As made clear by parents' exhausted reports from the "second shift," caring for children is no easier after work. We rarely think to extend our demands for childcare assistance beyond the workday, but there are very sound reasons for doing so. First, the idea that extended after-school care can only be performed by parents is undercut by reality. The majority of households already trust the state and

private sector to attend to their children's needs on their behalf when they send their children to school every day. Though there's a pervasive social assumption that 100% "DIY parenting" is inherently more virtuous, the truth is that parents, as a class, are not innately better-suited than experienced caregivers when it comes to performing emotionally rewarding, but ultimately mundane childcare-related tasks like homework, cooking dinner, and tucking children in. One Percent families have no qualms enlisting the private village to help their children with Common Core-style math and building science projects. In fact, rich parents are the few people in the U.S. who are able to take advantage of the ultimate outsourcing village: the boarding school.

BUT WHY SHOULD BOARDING SCHOOLS ONLY BE the purview of the wealthy? In Europe, this isn't the case. When I was growing up in France, my mother took a job as a caregiver, in a home for people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. This was just a few years after my parents divorced, in the mid-'90s. The two of us decamped from a sleepy village outside the City of Lyon to a cheaper unit in the city. Our new home, in the projects of the Duchère neighborhood, was rougher. Concerned about my ability to adjust—I was, in her words, "an easily influenced child"—my mother enrolled me in the *Internat Adolphe Favre*, in the hilly Croix-Rousse quarter. Formerly a boarding school, the public institution (paid for by the city) now sent its attendees to the local elementary and high school. Like most parents who sent their children there, my mother paid an insignificant fee. From ages eight to ten, my mother dropped me off on Sunday nights and picked me up on Friday evenings. Our parents remained responsible for school-related meetings, and could call us during phone hours in the evenings if they wished. We were cared for by educators, fed by chefs at dinner, and at night, we were watched by guards we knew on a first-name basis. We slept in loft beds with our own very desks at the bottom. If we finished our homework early, we played soccer in the field outside, screamed at each other over foosball on the second floor, or hid out to read. We shared secrets and blanket forts and, occasionally, lice. Meanwhile, our parents had the space to get their shit together, knowing we were safe and happy. For my mother, this meant being able to work nights to support us, to sleep soundly when she got home, and even to have a hint of a social life as a single mother.

Although boarding schools are rarer here than in Western Europe or even China, they have long been a part of this country's fabric. Though they typically have a school attached to the property, these institutions can take different forms: dormitories or boarding houses, for example, accommodate children outside of school hours, with the children simply attending the local school (as was the case with the boarding school I attended). A small network of boarding schools cater to children with developmental or behavioral challenges. A handful of these specialized schools, along with magnet schools with competitive entry requirements, are funded by the states and sprinkled around the country. At the federal level, the Bureau of Indian Education funds boarding options, run by tribal agencies and reserved for

Native American children. (These tribally-administrated boarding schools are a long way removed from the boarding schools into which the U.S. government once systematically crammed Native-American children, cruelly subjecting them to a curriculum of acculturation and assimilation that left many former students with related trauma well into adulthood.) But for the most part, the boarding school is still principally a tool of the rich. Some, like Exeter and Andover, boast having cared for former United States Presidents as children. Privately owned and operated, the five-figure annual price restricts attendance to the

nity to outsource their second shift duties.

For now, the marketing for boarding schools often reflects the hang-ups of American parenting culture, by exclusively emphasizing the benefits to the students. The prep schools vaunt their pipelines into well-ranked universities and the white-collar professions, while the special-needs schools may flaunt different improved outcomes for the student. The SEED network of charter boarding schools, for example, promotes its ability to keep its attendees out of jail and prison. Obviously, the advantages to students are laudable. But they also, if only subliminally, obscure the

“WE SHOULD RECLAIM THE CONCEPT OF THE CHILDBREARING VILLAGE FROM THE RICH...”

elite, save for a few scholarship-sponsored spots. The children who attend these schools are well cared-for by a team of educators, for extended periods of time away from their parents.

WE SHOULD RECLAIM THE CONCEPT of the childrearing village from the rich. Under the auspices of the WWII childcare program, the American state once proved its willingness to go to great lengths to support parents. Curbing the crisis of care, and producing happier families, is surely a worthy goal in and of itself, even outside the context of a war effort. Childcare programs could create thousands of public, caregiver positions nationwide, for competitive wages and employment benefits. In advocating for this option, it would be crucial for the Left to insist on the exclusion of the private sector, namely through charters, in order to preserve accountability and greater investment from the public. The increased availability of public caregiver positions formerly only available on the private side would improve the negotiation position of the low-wage worker army on the “private village” side. Public boarding schools could also encourage the state to support other generous family policies as a means of keeping enrollment in these public boarding schools at manageable levels. Of course, the boarding assistance should always be optional. Importantly, the government must never ever again be in the business of forcibly removing children from their homes, or divorcing them from their familial and cultural networks. Nor would parents have to fear being replaced by boarding school staff: just as in healthy relationships between school teachers and parents in a non-boarding context, all the caregivers in a child’s life have important, complementary roles to play. As with the WWII program, boarding assistance should be of such quality and comprehensiveness that parents would clamor for the opportu-

nity that boarding schools offer parents a real chance to better balance work and family. Parents across the socioeconomic spectrum would greatly benefit from public, well-funded boarding schools.

Naturally, individual personalities and circumstances will differ—and sometimes evolve even within the same family—which means that boarding school will not be the best fit for every parent and child. Nor should it be. Boarding schools should be about expanding options to parents and reimagining our childrearing culture. But carving out more time to care for children and for oneself can be achieved by additional means, too. Luckily for us, some of these means complement existing goals of the Left. For instance, shortening the work week to 36 or even 30 hours would grant parents who wish to spend more time at home the power to do so. In the Netherlands, which already works one of the shortest weeks in the European Union, the government actually encourages parents to take more time off during the week. For many, this day or half-day has become *kinderdag*, or kids’ day. Imagine a state where taking weekly family leave was not only possible, but encouraged—and where, depending on the family’s wealth, parents who opted to work a shorter week would be entitled to compensation to balance their reduced hours. A statutorily-reduced work week would also discourage employers from demanding longer hours from parents who would choose to place their children in boarding schools.

The argument for universal childcare is grounded in best outcomes for children, but also, just as importantly, in superior quality of life for their parents. Why should we concede the relevance of parents’ happiness, or their need to be supported by a state that benefits from their labor and social reproduction? The truth is that American parents across all economic classes deserve better help during the work day *and* outside working hours. A nanny state would go a long way towards giving us all a chance to be happier. ♦

THE BEST SEX POSITIONS FOR CONCEIVING AN EMPLOYABLE CHILD

We've all been there. You meet a handsome, intelligent, totally plow-worthy man, but then you start worrying about all the usual x-factors, such as: "What are the chances that our future children will be able to earn a reliable income in this risky economy?" Futurologists agree: in the coming decades, regular employment's going down, gigs are going up, and our robot replacements are running at us sideways with their icy metal claws. But don't worry. There are plenty of ways to improve the career prospects of your zygote-to-be. "Your chances of conceiving a career-eligible child increase exponentially if your partner is gainfully employed at the time of intercourse," says Dr. Jimmy Mayflower, a sexologist from the Institute of Actualization Research and Development. "But that's just one factor. Many studies show that future hireability is strongly correlated with all parental choices, including decisions made during fertilization itself. The appropriate conception configuration can really make or break your child's potential usefulness to an employer." By 'conception configuration' Dr. Mayflower means your dickin' direction, so choose wisely, and give your child a serious boost out of this crumbling economy.

1 DESK DUTY



Clear off your unpaid bills and get busy on your workspace. Engaging in intercourse on your desk sends a message to the universe: "I don't care if my child is tall, short, attractive, ugly, whatever. All I care about is their ability to win employer-sponsored health insurance in a society increasingly disinterested in whether or not its citizens live or die." If you're having trouble gettin' busy in the same place where you sit and slave away for enough cash to pay your rent, just close your eyes and visualize your future child: mindlessly performing corporate busywork in exchange for the right to seek preventative treatment but still go bankrupt during a major medical crisis.

2 THE DOGS OF WALL STREET



Doggy style, but with a twist: hold your phone in your right hand while your partner holds his phone in his left. As he thrusts, both of you check your stock portfolios. If neither of you own any actual stocks, dial up a strategy game with numbers in it – Sudoku, Kenken, that sort of thing. "Looking at stocks or any numerical flow during intercourse helps guarantee maximum ROI on your genetic material," says Dr. Mayflower. "On top of that, bending over in a relaxed position opens up your root chakra, which will allow wealth energy to pour in." For an added bonus, lift and straighten your left leg. This may grant your child a "leg-up" on the age group they'll be competing against for scraps from capitalism's table.

3 THE IV LEAGUE



Of course we all know the best route to probable employment: it's a degree from an Ivy League university. If you have the misfortune not to belong to a legacy family or the top 1%, don't despair – show your school spirit! Give us an 'I'! Give us a 'V'! Lie back on a table with your legs spread wide, toes pointed. You're the 'V', while your partner, standing between your legs, is the 'I'. During intercourse, remind your man to remain as still as possible, maintaining the 'I' shape from his toes to the crown of his head. "Unfortunately, if your partner gasps or shudders too much, there's no guarantee your child will win the lottery to get into the right pre-pre-school in the Ivy League feeder system," says Dr. Mayflower. "And the available data clearly shows that an infant who doesn't attend the right pre-pre-school has a decreased chance of achieving that Ivy League degree, a vital credential which highly increases the likelihood of a second interview during the job application process."

4 MISSIONARY



Sure, the missionary position is boring and outdated. But even in the chaos of economic uncertainty, religious institutions remain more or less stable. One way to get your potential failchild out of the basement is to psychically invest them with missionary vigor during the act of conception. This may encourage them to travel in the service of God (hopefully to less volatile corners of the globe). And when they return, they can teach Sunday school, or manage a homeless shelter, or work in a soup kitchen – hey. At least it's something.

5 CREATIVE'S CARTWHEEL



Want to boost your incipient embryo's creativity? Have your man do a handstand. Once he's stabilized the position, take a running leap and jump on top of his man-candy. Then point your left leg at the ceiling and your right leg at the west wall (in feng shui, west is the direction of luck and imagination). Then loop your hula hoop around his right arm, cross it over your left palm, and hold the top of the hula hoop in place with a firm chin-tuck. Find this position challenging? "Not every conception configuration will work for you and your partner," says Dr. Mayflower. "But if you want your future child to be a professional creative in a precarious gig economy, you'll have much more difficult and anxiety-ridden experiences ahead of you."

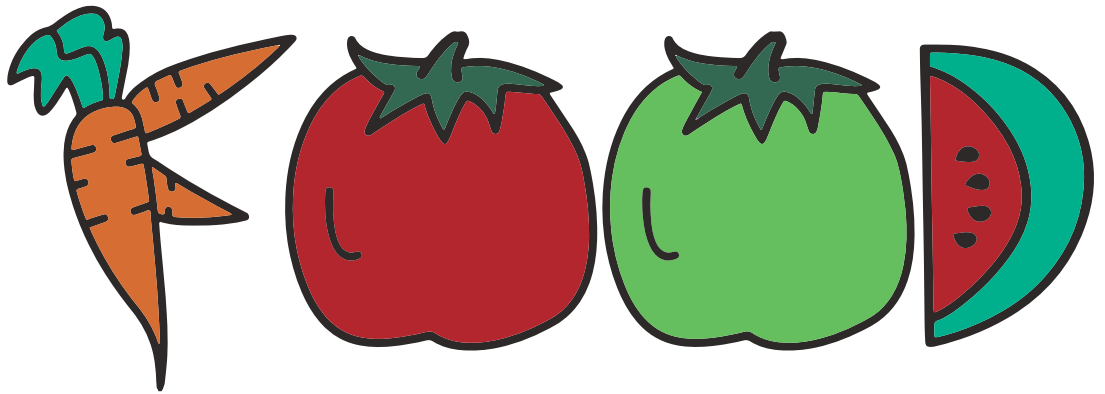
6 ANAL



Not ready to risk having kids? Too poor to afford the birth control your employer refuses to cover, but too proud to donate your eggs? There's always safe, reliable anal. "If you're not prepared for the decades of stress it takes to hustle your child through the job market," says Dr. Mayflower, "it's best to avoid any chance of conception." But he adds: "Do consider selling your eggs. Research laboratories and wealthy individuals are always looking for healthy young biological specimens for a number of interesting projects. Selling off your unwanted bio-resources is a great way to stay afloat as the economy continues its rapid death-spiral into the void."



A PUBLIC OPTION FOR



I KNOW IT IS A CONTENTIOUS POSITION THESE DAYS, but I have always been in favor of public schools. I went to a public school. I enjoyed myself there. I believe it taught me some things. I've also always been suspicious of privatization schemes. That's because I tend to think that when a service is for profit rather than for the public's benefit, all sorts of perverse incentives arise. If schools operated for profit, with education subsidized by vouchers, the companies running the schools would have an interest in spending as little as possible actually educating the students, because every dollar they could save would be a dollar they could keep. That strikes me as dangerous, and I can't help but think that it will lead inexorably in the direction of giving children iPads rather than teachers.

Once, though, when I voiced my dubiousness about "voucherization," a gentleman challenged me. Why, he said, did I think private schools with vouchers would be worse than public schools? We entrust other areas of life to the private sector and they work just fine. Consider, for example, grocery stores. We don't have government-run grocery stores like we have government-run schools. And yet most people in the country seem pretty happy with their grocery stores. They can get whatever they want there, and if they can't afford it, we subsidize it with a "voucher" (i.e. food stamps). The profit motive hasn't led to a rapacious system of exploitation. In fact, it has given consumers the ability to get an astonishing variety of goods for incredibly low prices. Why are you uniquely suspicious of what the private sector would do to education, when it provides us so efficiently with our food?

The gentleman's argument was a strong one. I will confess that I felt a bit stumped by it. He was right. Every week I go to the grocery store and I get relatively tasty things for relatively low prices. And so I found myself tempted by his idea that education could be provided by "learning stores" just like nutrition is provided by grocery stores.

Then I remembered that nutrition in America is a total disaster, that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the country is obese or overweight, and that half of the country either has diabetes or is at high risk of having diabetes soon. If we start providing education like we provide nutrition, then God help the little children...

Food is actually the perfect example of a system in which the presence of a profit motive is having incredibly destructive human consequences. That's because it introduces a terrible incentive: to sell people the products they'll get addicted to rather than the products that are good for them. Americans live on junk food; they have terrible diets, with too much sodium, too many calories, too much sugar, and too few fruits and vegetables.

And as food companies seek to increase their revenue, the problem is spreading internationally. The *New York Times* recently reported that "multinational food companies like Nestlé, PepsiCo and General Mills have been aggressively expanding their presence in developing nations, unleashing a marketing juggernaut that is upending traditional diets from Brazil to Ghana to India." Nestlé, for instance, hired legions of Brazilians to sell its products door to door, and regularly sent a barge down the Amazon river offering pudding, cookies, and candy. The result, according to the *Times*, has been "more obese Brazilians," with "a new epidemic of diabetes and heart disease." In places that "struggled with hunger and malnutrition just a generation ago" there are now "soaring rates of obesity," with "the



THIS CEREAL IS BAD FOR YOU DO NOT EAT IT

growing availability of high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods” causing more people to be “both overweight and undernourished.” In poor Brazilian towns, one can find 17-year-olds who weigh 250lbs and suffer from hypertension, problems once unknown in the developing world.

We know precisely why this happens. Bob Drane, the former Kraft Foods executive who invented Lunchables, described the logic of the industry:

“Discover what consumers want to buy and give it to them with both barrels. Sell more, keep your job! How do marketers often translate these ‘rules’ into action on food? Our limbic brains love sugar, fat, salt. . . . So formulate products to deliver these. Perhaps add low-cost ingredients to boost profit margins. Then ‘supersize’ to sell more. . . . And advertise/promote to lock in ‘heavy users.’”

Lunchables themselves were the result of this logic. They’re bad for kids, since they’re largely comprised of baloney and cheese, but Oscar Mayer realized that parents with little time would snap up something that eliminated the need to make lunch, and kids would crave them because it came with a big block of fatty cheese. (Experiments with healthier Lunchables were called off due to poor sales.)

Food and beverage executives are fairly open about how they think. “Half the world’s population has not had a Coke in the last 30 days,” said the president of Coca-Cola International. “There’s 600 million teenagers who have not had a Coke in the

last week. So the opportunity for that is huge.” According to the *Times*, a former Coke vice president said that “the goal became much larger than merely beating the rival brands; Coca-Cola strove to outsell every other thing people drank, including milk and water. The marketing division’s efforts boiled down to one question... ‘How can we drive more ounces into more bodies more often?’” Coke has specifically targeted poor areas around the world. Coke’s former North American president, Jeffrey Dunn, was horrified by what he saw when he toured one of the impoverished districts the company was targeting: “A voice in my head says, ‘These people need a lot of things, but they don’t need a Coke.’ I almost threw up.” But when Dunn raised his concerns and tried to change the business, he encountered “very aggressive” resistance and was fired.

The usual response here is to blame the consumers: if people get fat and die from eating garbage and drinking poison, perhaps they shouldn’t be buying it. If companies are selling products loaded with sugar and fat, it’s because people really like sugar and fat. This is always the way the industry responds. At a meeting of food executives in which a Kraft vice president tried to convince his peers to step up on nutrition, discussion came to a close when the CEO of General Mills vigorously defended existing practice. As the *Times* summarized:

“[Consumers were fickle.] Sometimes they worried about sugar, other times fat. General Mills, he said, acted responsibly to both the public and shareholders by offering products to satisfy dieters and other concerned shoppers, from low sugar to added whole grains. But most often, he said, people bought what they liked, and they liked what tasted good. ‘Don’t talk to me about nutrition,’ he reportedly said, taking on the voice of the typical consumer: ‘Talk to me about taste, and if this stuff tastes better, don’t run around trying to sell stuff that doesn’t taste good.’ To react to the critics, Sanger said, would jeopardize the sanctity of the recipes that had made his products so successful. General Mills would not pull back. He would push his people onward, and he urged his peers to do the same.”

The former CEO of Philip Morris (now Altria), which owns Kraft, affirmed this, adding that it partially arises from the pressure of a highly competitive market:

“People could point to these things and say, ‘They’ve got too much sugar, they’ve got too much salt... Well, that’s what the consumer wants, and we’re not putting a gun to their head to eat it. That’s what they want. If we give them less, they’ll buy less, and the competitor will get our market. So you’re sort of trapped.’”

This has been the consensus view. Those within the industry who have pushed for reform have gotten nowhere, and it’s obvious why: as the Philip Morris CEO points out, a company that unilaterally decided to make its products healthier would not actually make the world healthier. It would just watch its market share plummet. So long as a company is concerned primarily with revenue and profit, asking it to care about nutrition is asking it to stop caring about its entire institutional purpose. It is like asking a drug pusher to sign on to an initiative to make heroin less addictive. Good luck.

It’s long past time to discard the idea that companies just give people “what they want,” and that blame for the popularity of inferior products rests with consumers. First, it’s easy to understand why there needs to be a conceptual difference between “what people buy” and “what people want.” That’s because people *don’t* want to die of heart disease, and yet they buy things that make them more likely to die of heart disease. And it’s not enough to say that they must simply prefer “eating badly” to “not dying”: if you ask them, they’ll tell you they’d much rather *not* have diabetes. But they do. And part of the reason they do is that an entire multibillion dollar industry is dedicated to finding ways to make sure they keep eating poorly.

COMPANIES DON’T JUST AGGREGATE CONSUMER PREFERENCES and try to satisfy those preferences. They also try to shape those preferences through expensive scientific research. Consider the Cheeto. The Cheeto is specifically designed to trick the human body through its “vanishing caloric density,” which means that “if something melts down quickly, your brain thinks that there’s no calories in it... you can just keep eating it forever.” People do not just eat piles of Cheetos because they are “dangerously cheesy,” or because Chester Cheetah told them to. They eat piles of Cheetos because Kraft Foods consciously took advantage of an error in the way the human brain decides whether to keep eating something. As reporter Michael Moss says, “it’s not just a matter of poor willpower on the part of the consumer and a give-the-people-what-they-want attitude on the part of the food manufacturers. What I found, over four years of research and reporting, was a conscious effort — taking place in labs and marketing meetings and grocery-store aisles — to get people hooked on foods that are convenient and inexpensive.”

Moss found an internal Frito-Lay memo from 1957, which described the “fears and resistances” that were causing people to steer clear of potato chips, e.g. “You can’t stop eating them; they’re fattening; they’re not good for you.” But Frito-Lay was not focused on making sure people *could* stop eating potato chips, they wanted to find a way to make sure people felt *okay* with not stopping eating potato chips. So, for example, they stopped referring to their chips as “fried” and started referring to them as “toasted,” because this made people feel less guilty about eating them. We can see

here that consumer preference isn't being satisfied in any meaningful sense. The "preference" stated by the consumers was for potato chips to be less fatty and addictive. Instead of "giving the people what they wanted," companies found ways to fool them into thinking they were getting what they wanted. People are not asking for "a chip that seems healthier than it is," they're asking for "a chip that is healthy," so consumers have actually *not* been given what they want.

You could try to say that consumers still bear the responsibility for figuring out whether they're being deceived. But that's (1) more difficult than it sounds, (2) incredibly time-consuming, and (3) oblivious to the biological reality. First, large amounts of money are spent figuring out the answer to the question: "How can we make something that seems healthy but is actually addictively tasty (and thus not actually healthy)?" Yogurt has taken off in part because the industry realized it could be branded as a health food, but loaded up with sugar in a way that made people keep craving more of it. From a revenue perspective, the optimum food is the food that *seems* both tasty and healthy, which will often involve a lot of deception. I've fallen directly into this trap before. For a while, I ate Raisin Bran for breakfast, and I thought I was choosing a nutritious cereal. (It has fiber! And protein!) Nope: Raisin Bran has more sugar than Lucky Charms. I'd also been proud of myself for eliminating sodas entirely. Instead, I drank Minute Maid's "Cranberry-Apple-Raspberry Juice" with my lunch. The label has pictures of leaves and fruits, and it looks so *natural*, so unlike Coca-Cola. Unfortunately, it also contains 57 grams of sugar, more than root beer.

Now, you could blame me here. These products had labels (thanks only, by the way, to strict government requirements). I could have looked at them, and instead I made an assumption. But I refuse to accept all of the blame here. It was not because I am stupid that I thought Raisin Bran was healthy. It's because the Kellogg's company *wanted* me to think that. They spent a lot of time thinking about the various ways that they could leave people with the impression that Raisin Bran is good for them without resorting to outright fraud. So it says "Heart Healthy" prominently on the box. It says "Real Fruit" and "Whole Grain." It says "Delicious Raisins Perfectly Balanced With Crisp, Toasted Bran Flakes" rather than "Delicious Sugar-Coated Raisins," which is what they are. And this is all designed so that I will do exactly what I did for a period of months: gobble Raisin Bran every morning, and think to myself "Wow, I can't believe Raisin Bran tastes so good, even though it's healthy. I guess because it's good for me, I can eat another bowl," without noticing that the whole *reason* it tastes so good and I want to eat another bowl is that a heap of sugar has been dumped into it.

It's tough to eat healthily, even when you want to, because you're fighting a massive industry that's trying to deceive you. Hacking your way through the thick web of manipulative branding techniques takes a lot of time and psychological energy. Figuring out how to eat well is not actually especially easy. You've got to spend a lot of time examining and comparing nutrition facts, and even those aren't designed as intuitively as they could be. Industry lobbying has kept the FDA from listing sugar quantities in "teaspoons" rather than "grams," because hearing that something contains "five teaspoons" of sugar might make you far more likely to avoid it. Providing consumers with the information they actually *need* in order to make their decisions well, e.g. giving them a more obvious and meaningful sense of what's in the products they're buying, would impact the revenues of companies that rely on people not asking too many questions. (If we really believe that consumer "preferences" should be satisfied, we should include warnings on processed foods the same way we include warnings on tobacco. The more informed consumers are about reality, the more defensible it is to say they have made a choice.)

The "consumer choice" defense also ignores the biological reality of what is going on. Cravings are not manifestations of human choice. They are biological urges that are extremely difficult to resist. "Once you pop, you just can't stop" is not a slogan, it's a fact. It is incredibly difficult to stop eating Pringles once one has started. I have tried and failed many

times, and I am a person of uncommon stubbornness and willpower. The Pringle has been specially engineered to make me not just want to eat it, but *need* to eat it. Nutritionists and food scientists take very seriously the idea that food can have addictive properties. That's not surprising, because the industry tries so hard to make sure that it does. Yet the "individual responsibility" ethic prevails.

The harms of a corporate food system do not affect everyone equally. Instead, they fall disproportionately on the poor, who have less time for food preparation and information gathering, and thus default to fast food for its convenience. Disparities in health consequences reflect that fact: less well-off people have worse diets and suffer obesity, heart disease, and diabetes in greater numbers. A privatized system of nutrition delivery, predictably, delivers the worst outcomes to those with the least money.

EXAMINING THE FOOD SYSTEM in detail is instructive because it reveals a lot about how free markets work and don't work. We can imagine how things would play out if the same system were relied upon to deliver education: a few big companies would end up running most of the schools. Individuals could go to whichever school they could pay for. But since school companies would be competing with each other, and trying to maximize profits, they would be incentivized to spend as little as possible educating students, while deceiving parents into thinking their children were learning more than they actually were. Just as food companies do better not when they offer *health* but when they offer the *appearance* of health, school companies would adopt branding techniques that made them appear high-quality (use of the word "academy," fancy seal, uniforms, etc.) while trying to spend as little money as possible on actually educating the child. For-profit education will be as "educational" as for-profit products like Coca-Cola are "nutritional."

My friend Sarah likes to describe capitalism by comparing it to the "paperclip maximizer." The paperclip maximizer is a thought experiment used to warn about the potentially deadly effects of artificial intelligence. It's about how a machine given the wrong instructions will produce the wrong results. You have an intelligent robot, and you'd like him to collect paperclips. So you program the robot with the following instruction: "Maximize the number of paperclips in your possession." Then you set it loose. The robot first goes around the world collecting all the existing paperclips. But once it has them all, it still isn't finished. After all, it must *maximize* the number of paperclips it has. So it begins turning everything it finds into paperclips. Soon, the entire planet is noth-

THIS JUICE IS
BAD
FOR
YOU
DO NOT
DRINK IT



ing but a wasteland of paperclips. Eventually, the universe itself will be a vast cosmic heap of paperclips. A seemingly benign instruction, carried out with precision and efficiency, destroyed the world.

Corporations can operate similarly. The Coca-Cola company follows a mandate: “raise revenue by selling drinks.” It sounds innocent. But the result is perverse: the company simply tries to get “as many ounces as possible into as many bodies as possible.” Every additional Coca-Cola sold is an additional dollar of revenue. There is no upper limit, then. “Growth potential” is all that matters, regardless of other consequences. And the lives of people only matter to the extent that keeping them alive longer will allow them to drink more Coke. I’m not exaggerating here. Those are the words of the Coca-Cola executives. And they flow perfectly rationally from the structure of the institution.

Capitalism is very effective at increasing production. Even Karl Marx was impressed with its achievements. But it also only works to the extent that the institutional incentives will, when followed, produce good results. People who defend capitalism do think it produces good results, because the incentive is to sell as many goods as possible, and that means selling the products that people want to buy. But, like the paperclip maximizer, “sell the goods that people will buy” is a benign rule that leads to a perverse result. A company that takes a poll of the things people want in a snack, and sells a snack with those qualities, will probably do well. But a company that researches ways to trigger biological cravings, and use subtle branding cues to trick people into thinking the product is better than it is, will do even better. The theory of a free market works at the “lemonade stand” level. Yet the paperclip robot, too, works at first: it’s what happens when the imperatives are carried to their endpoint that is so destructive. Capitalism, carried to its endpoint, will devour the earth, because that’s what its programming requires.

SO IT WOULD BE BEST IF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM DID NOT operate like the food system. But perhaps we should be thinking about the opposite as well: what if the food system operated more like the public school system? What if there was a “public option” for food?

Public schools are an “option” because they already exist within a market for schools. If you’d like to, you can opt out of the public school system and send your children to a private school. Even Britain’s single-payer health service, the NHS, is a public “option” of a kind, because people can still pay for private health insurance and private hospitals if they choose. (Because most people are satisfied with the NHS, however, only a fraction of people do this.) A public option is useful because it doesn’t have to think about profit, it can just think about providing the public with what they need.

Let us imagine a public option for food. It is a state-funded restaurant called the American Free Diner (AFD). At the American Free Diner, anyone can show up and eat, and the food is free. It’s designed to be as healthy as possible while still being pretty tasty. It’s not going to be tastier than McDonalds fries, but the aim of the American Free Diner is not to get you to hooked on having as many meals as possible, it’s designed to get you to have a satisfying and nutritionally complete meal. And there are options. For breakfast you can have eggs and (veggie?) bacon with fruit, oatmeal, avocado on toast, or a smoothie. Lunch is soups, salads, and sandwiches. Oh, and you can also always stop by and grab free fruit or other snacks. Now, you have to eat your meal during the time you’re in the restaurant, so there’s no smuggling food away and selling it. Anyone can have up to three meals a day there; you sign up with an ID and then you get a card. If you ate at the American Free Diner for every meal, you’d be meeting every possible recommended nutritional guideline. Every town has an American Free Diner in it. The music is great and there’s a buzzing neon sign, but it’s nothing too fancy.

Our “public option” for food does not mean people can’t go elsewhere, just as our public school system doesn’t mean that people can’t enroll in pri-

vate schools. But it does ensure that anyone who wants to can turn up and get a high-quality meal for free, without having to have much information on their own, without having to have any money, and without having to *do* very much. Now, the question is: what would happen? I think you’d see a lot of people taking their meals at the American Free Diner. That’s because the food is *free*. And that would be a very good thing indeed, because every meal eaten there is a healthy meal. Who *wouldn’t* eat at the American Free Diner? Well, rich people wouldn’t eat there, because they can afford even nicer food. But rich people also enroll their children in private schools. They’re not the target population here. What we’re trying to do is make sure that everyone has access to a baseline level of nutrition, just like everyone should have access to a baseline level of education.

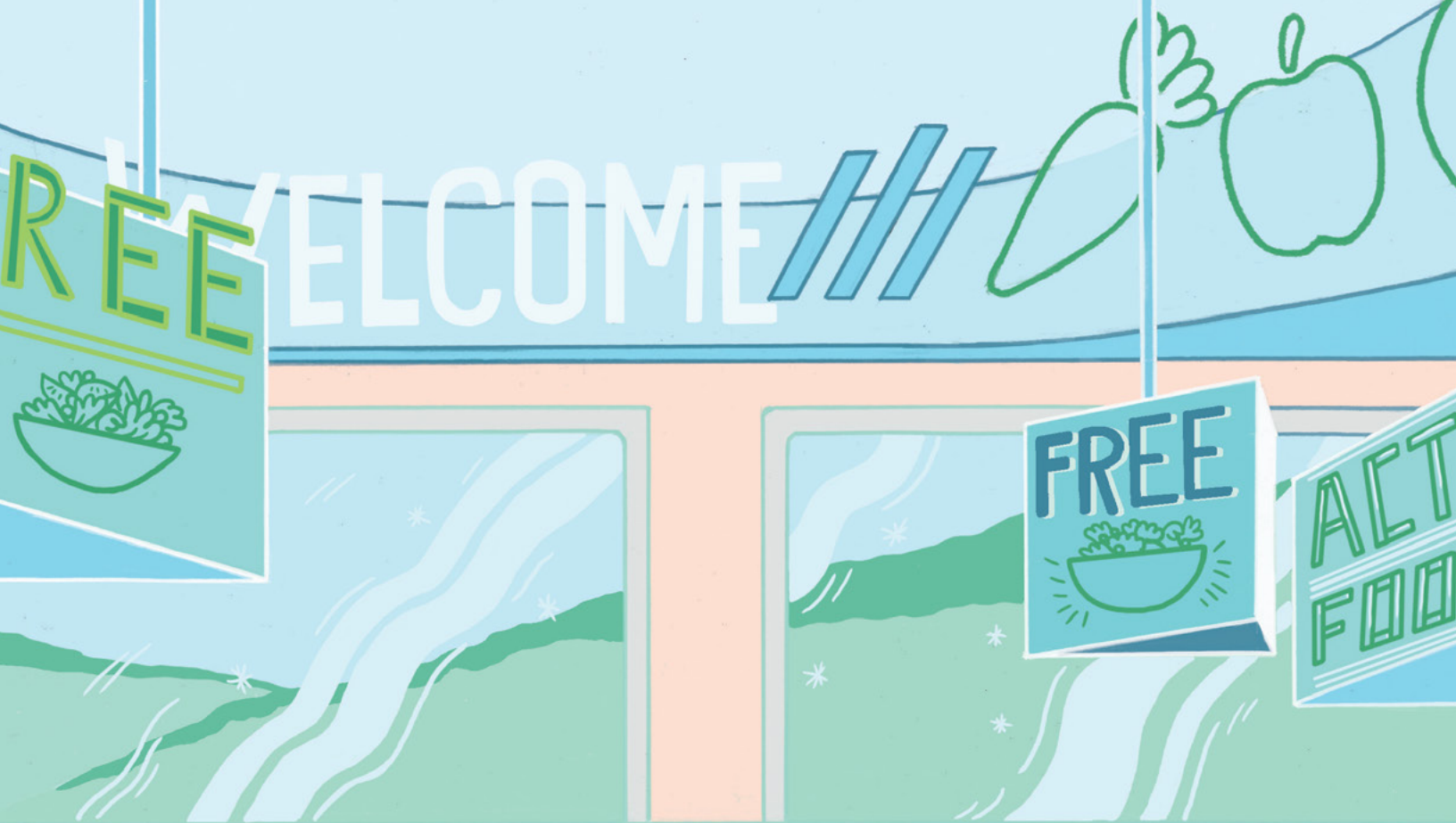
Personally, I think the AFD is our best way of solving our national nutrition crisis. Currently, we try to provide nutrition to the poor with a “voucher” system. That has a couple of problems. First, people don’t know what to buy, so they are highly susceptible to being manipulated. Second, buying groceries and making meals at home is incredibly time-consuming, which is one reason people tend toward fast food. The AFD solves these problems. It doesn’t restrict your choices, you can still buy whatever you want on the free market. But it does offer you one more choice: eat free, healthy meals at the AFD.

One of the reasons people will be skeptical about the AFD is that they have little confidence in the state to do anything right. There is a tacit acceptance of the basic idea of “public choice theory”: that state actors are just as much selfish maximizers as anyone else, and that the only difference between the state and a corporation is that the state doesn’t have to be as accountable to its consumers. But this view only captures part of the truth: sometimes states are selfish, sometimes they are not, just as human beings themselves are sometimes avaricious and sometimes benevolent. Which motive is acted upon will depend on who is in charge and how the institution is set up.

There’s nothing inherent about a public school being public that requires it to be crappy. As I say, I went to a fantastic public school. But a few things are necessary for a public institution to run well. It needs to be free of bureaucratic constraint. It needs to have a clear mandate. It needs to be run by the right people. And it needs to be well-funded. When people think of the state offering food, I think they probably recoil: they think of Soviet canteens, perhaps, and government cheese. But there’s no reason things need to be this way. I could give you a dozen people who could run a nutritious, delicious, and decidedly non-dreary nonprofit diner given a sufficient budget.

FRANKLY, I DON’T SEE MANY OTHER EASY WAYS OUT OF our collective nutrition crisis. You could try to legislate the activities of companies like General Mills and Coca-Cola, restrict their advertising and regulate their product more. But ultimately, this won’t change their incentives. You could try to publicly campaign to get people to make better nutrition choices. But this is probably doomed, since lack of desire/willpower is only a minor part of the reason why people eat bad food. You could try to restrict what people can spend food stamps on. But that only helps people who are on food stamps, seems invasive and nannying, and will be difficult to enforce. A better idea is to just open restaurants, and incentivize people to go there by making them free, and by deploying the same marketing/branding techniques that companies use presently to get people to make *bad* decisions. (It’s called the American Free Diner to conjure patriotic associations.)

I used to think grocery stores were a good argument against public schools. Now, I think public schools are a good argument against grocery stores. The American diet is killing us, and people are making money encouraging us to continue eating badly, tempting us with pudding barges. It’s time to introduce a public option for food. It’s time for an American Free Diner. ♦



who are the real nazis?



Dinesh
D'Souza,
"The Big
Lie: Exposing
the Nazi Roots of
the American Left,"
Regnery, \$29.99, 256pp.

WHAT IS SOPHISTRY? It's a kind of slick pseudo-logic, a set of arguments that are superficially persuasive but deeply and dishonestly flawed. The hallmark of sophistry is the contrast between how much sense it *seems* to make and how little sense it actually does make when you stop to think about it. Someone making a sophistical argument seems incredibly logical and rational. Even as the arguments they make are revealed under scrutiny to be patently absurd, an uncritical listener might easily be tempted to believe them.

Dinesh D'Souza is a sophist, and a good one. Most people on the left probably won't appreciate just how good

he is. Seeing the title of his new book, *The Big Lie: Exposing the Nazi Roots of the American Left*, they'll snort derisively. A book like this, they'll say, is so self-evidently absurd that there is no need to even bother with it. Even to call it sophistry is to pay it too great a compliment. Sophistry is subtle and persuasive. Calling the left Nazis is not persuasive, and it certainly isn't subtle.

One of the many harmful tendencies on the political left, however, is the failure to understand how things appear to people who are not already leftists. This is what prevented so many people from appreciating the threat posed by Donald Trump: actions that looked like PR catastrophes or disqualifying embarrassments to a progressive simply did not look the same to non-progressives. They'll treat *The Big Lie* the same: too silly, don't even engage with it. Thus, even though according to *Publisher's Weekly*, D'Souza's book is currently the #1 bestselling political book in the country, the only major media outlet that has reviewed it has been the *U.S. News and World Report*, which wrote it off as "dull" and "dumb."

A major reason not to take *The Big Lie* seriously is D'Souza himself. By mainstream standards, D'Souza's career has been a comical embarrassment. D'Souza first found notoriety while an undergraduate at Dartmouth, where the student publication he edited outed members of the Gay Student Alliance. He became a prominent conservative pundit with his book *Illiberal Education*, but by the 2000s he had, in the words of *Vanity Fair*, "eaten away at his respectability in intellectual circles" with extreme and often bizarre claims. He blamed 9/11 on Hollywood liberals, saying that Osama bin Laden was primarily motivated by a hatred of Western sexual decadence, an argument that put off conservatives with its implication that bin Laden shared their values. His *The Roots of Obama's Rage* argued that Barack Obama was a conduit for his father's radical anti-colonial politics, with the "philandering, inebriated, African socialist [Obama, Sr.] now setting the nation's agenda through the reincarnation of his dreams in his son." Even the conservative *Weekly Standard* called this "lunacy." Further embarrassments followed. In 2012, he was forced to resign as president of a Christian college after allegations of adultery. In 2013, D'Souza recorded an infomercial for pop-up Christmas trees. And in 2014, he pled guilty to a felony campaign finance violation, spending eight months at a halfway house. (D'Souza alleged political persecution by the Obama administration, tweeting: "MLK was targeted by J. Edgar Hoover, an unsavory character; I was targeted by the equally unsavory B. Hussein Obama.")

Importantly, though, while D'Souza was discrediting himself more and more among the elite intellectuals who had once treated him as a serious thinker, he was building an audience elsewhere. D'Souza was embraced by Evangelical pastors like Rick Warren and made a fortune on the megachurch circuit. His books became bestsellers. His polemical documentaries, like *Obama's America* and *America: Imagine a World Without*

Her, attracted huge audiences despite being critically panned. As with Trump, the fact that mainstream institutions declared him an "embarrassing failure" by their standards didn't mean that he was one by everybody else's. It's easy to call him "fringe." But a lot of people live on the fringes, and they buy Dinesh D'Souza's books.

THE ARGUMENT OF THE BIG LIE IS THAT you have been lied to all your life. Since you were a schoolchild, you have been told that Nazism and fascism were "right-wing" ideologies. You have been told that left-wingers hate fascism, that they reject racism, totalitarianism, militarism, and all of fascism's other constituent ideological parts. But this has been a calculated falsehood. In fact, the progressive left have always been the real Nazis. And they have covered it up by using Adolf Hitler's infamous concept of the Big Lie, the lie so "colossal" that nobody would believe anybody "could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously." The progressive left calls the other side Nazis to disguise the fact that they, themselves, are Nazis. Every time a progressive accuses another party of fascistic behavior, it will be the progressives themselves who have acted like fascists. They call President Trump a fascist to disguise their own fascism. But fascism has always been fundamentally left-wing, and American conservatives must get serious about eliminating the threats posed by the Nazis in our midst, i.e. the left.

So far, so barmy. The book's thesis can be boiled down to the statement: "No, *You're The Nazis*" (which, frankly, I think ought to have been the title). It's obvious why hardly anybody on the left thinks this worth bothering with. Its thesis is politically childish and historically ignorant. It is a fundamentally *stupid* book. Once again, though, note the parallel: Trump, too, is childish, ignorant, and stupid. But he was also, to some people, persuasive, and he is now the President of the United States.

People who choose not to read *The Big Lie* will miss something: it's actually somewhat persuasive. It's wrong and deranged, but the ongoing conflation of "being right" and "being persuasive" is one of the reasons people believed nobody as wrong as Donald Trump could be so successful at winning support. *The Big Lie* is sophistry, and like all good sophistry, the ordinary person who reads it will come away, if not convinced, at least slightly unsettled and unsure of themselves. And while it's possible to refute most of the book in under a paragraph (stay tuned), it would be unwise to assume that just because D'Souza is delusional, this is a badly-written book. It is a well-written book, persuasive and carefully-sourced. It may be difficult for some people to accept that any book with *The Big Lie*'s thesis could have these qualities. But it does, and understanding that it does is important for leftists, who shouldn't laugh off people like D'Souza.

LET ME GO THROUGH AND GIVE YOU A POTTED version of *The Big Lie*. You will probably find it ridiculous for any one of ten zillion reasons. But instead of mentally arguing with the propositions, and identifying fallacious reasoning, I'd like you to focus on something else: namely, how the argument as a whole might be persuasive to someone, and why it works rhetorically.

Nazism, D'Souza says, is leftist, and leftists have been trying to cover this up. But, in an important rhetorical move, D'Souza acknowledges that the reader probably finds this proposition difficult to believe. He says, however, that this is because the reader has been brainwashed. And he asks the reader to set aside their preconceptions about the argument, to allow D'Souza to present the evidence and then to judge the case on this basis. We start with the history of Italian fascism and German Nazism. Benito Mussolini began as a socialist, heading the Italian Socialist Party. Even when Mussolini replaced his old class analysis with a belief in the primacy of the Italian nation, he was a communitarian who believed that fascism was a "true socialism" that countered "plutocratic elements." Likewise, while leftists have always tried to minimize the "Socialist" aspect of "National Socialism," Hitler himself said: "We are socialists. We are the enemies of today's capitalist system of exploitation... and we are determined to destroy this system under all conditions." Hitler condemned the United States as "a country where everything is built on the dollar." At its root, both fascism and progressivism are concerned with the same goal: empowerment of the state and the subjugation of the individual.

It may seem crazy to compare Hitler and Mussolini with American progressives, D'Souza acknowledges. But the affinities have always been more significant than the left would like to admit. Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger has been a favorite of radical leftists. And when we look at some of the "progressive heroes" among U.S. presidents, we see racist and totalitarian tendencies. Let us take, for example, Wilson, FDR, and Kennedy. Woodrow Wilson was an unabashed white supremacist who segregated the civil service and screened *Birth of a Nation* at the White House, touching off the rebirth of the KKK. He also launched an unprecedented crackdown on civil liberties, jailing critics of his war policies. When John F. Kennedy came back from a visit to Nazi Germany, he wrote in his diary that "I have come to the conclusion that fascism is right for Germany and Italy," and that "the Nordic races appear to be definitely superior to their Latin counterparts."

As for Roosevelt, he almost became an outright dictator. Mussolini himself said that he "greatly admired" Roosevelt, whose singular control of the government was "reminiscent of fascism." Roosevelt hosted Mussolini's aviation minister, Italo Balbo, at the White House and presented him with the Distinguished Flying Cross (the *New York Times* said Balbo left the White House "with his face wreathed in smiles," and Balbo wired Mussolini to say "the existence of anti-fascist sentiment abroad is a myth... exploded by the enthusiastic welcome my air squadron has received in America.") Roosevelt called Mussolini that "admirable Italian gentleman" and wrote that "I am much interested and deeply impressed by what he has accomplished."

Roosevelt was odious in other ways. He maintained segrega-

tion in the armed forces and New Deal agencies, placed more than 120,000 Japanese Americans in what he himself called "concentration camps," and cooperated with racist Southern Democrats in their efforts to block anti-lynching legislation. Roosevelt appointed a former Klansman, Hugo Black, to the Supreme Court, and Black recalled that Roosevelt had been fine with his KKK membership: "*President Roosevelt told me there was no reason for my worrying about my having been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He said some of his best friends and supporters he had in the state of Georgia were among members of the organization. He never indicated any doubt about my having been in the Klan nor did he indicate any criticism of me for having been a member of that organization.*" When the Supreme Court overturned the National Recovery Act as unconstitutional, Roosevelt threatened to pack the courts with compliant ideologues. His aide Harry Hopkins said "we have lawyers who will declare anything you want to do legal." What could be more totalitarian?

Liberal American intellectuals were also sympathetic to fascism. The *New Republic's* editor had warm words for Mussolini, for "arousing in a whole nation an increased moral energy." Gertrude Stein said Hitler should get the Nobel Peace Prize. Left historian Charles Beard called fascism "an amazing experiment in reconciling individualism and socialism." Columbia University economist William Pepperell celebrated the New Deal as a kind of "Fabian Fascism." Columbia itself "maintained friendly relations with Nazi academic institutions and representatives of Nazi Germany." When a Harvard alumnus, Ernst Hasnstaengl, became the head of the Nazi press bureau, *The Harvard Crimson* called for him to receive an honorary degree "appropriate to his high position" in a "great and profound nation." A number of Harvard faculty attended a gala at the docking of a Nazi warship in Boston, and a Harvard delegation attended a 1936 celebration at Heidelberg University, which the British had boycotted for being a Nazi propaganda event.

But, D'Souza contends, nobody should be surprised by this. For the history of progressivism and the Democratic Party is a history of vicious racism, dating back to the beginnings of the Democrats under Andrew Jackson. Jackson was a brutal slave-owner, proud of his reputation as an "Indian killer." He massacred Creek refugees, writing to his wife that "it was dark before we finished killing them." Jackson "used a combination of trickery, threats, and murder to evict native Indians from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee," was responsible for the Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears, and declared that "the whole Cherokee nation ought to be scourged." Jackson's administration was brutal in its treatment of Indians, and treated them as less than human, with Secretary of State Lewis Cass declaring that "the Indian is a child of impulse" who is "unrestrained by moral considerations."

From the Jacksonian Democrats to Wilson's progressives, the Democratic Party remained racist to its core. The KKK was for many years, according to left historian Eric Foner, "the domestic terrorism arm of the Democratic Party." Republicans were the party of abolition and Reconstruction, while Democrats were the party of slave-owners and segregationists. In the early 20th century, the "progressive" movement added another type of rac-

ism to the mix: eugenics. Turn-of-the-century progressives were enthusiastic supporters of eugenics, with birth control advocate (and Planned Parenthood forerunner) Margaret Sanger even giving a speech on eugenics to a meeting of the KKK, and in 1933 Sanger's *Birth Control Review* magazine published an article by Nazi eugenicist Ernst Rudin.

In fact, the Nazis were directly inspired by the actions of the Jacksonian Democrats and the progressive eugenicists. Hitler "praised to his inner circle the efficiency of America's extermination—by starvation and uneven combat—of the red savages who could not be tamed by captivity." Hitler was impressed by the writings of American eugenicists, and called environmentalist Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* his "Bible." He reported to have "studied with great interest the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would in all probability be of no value or injurious to the racial stock." American progressive eugenicists, and American race laws from the Democratic South, directly inspired the Nazi Nuremberg laws.

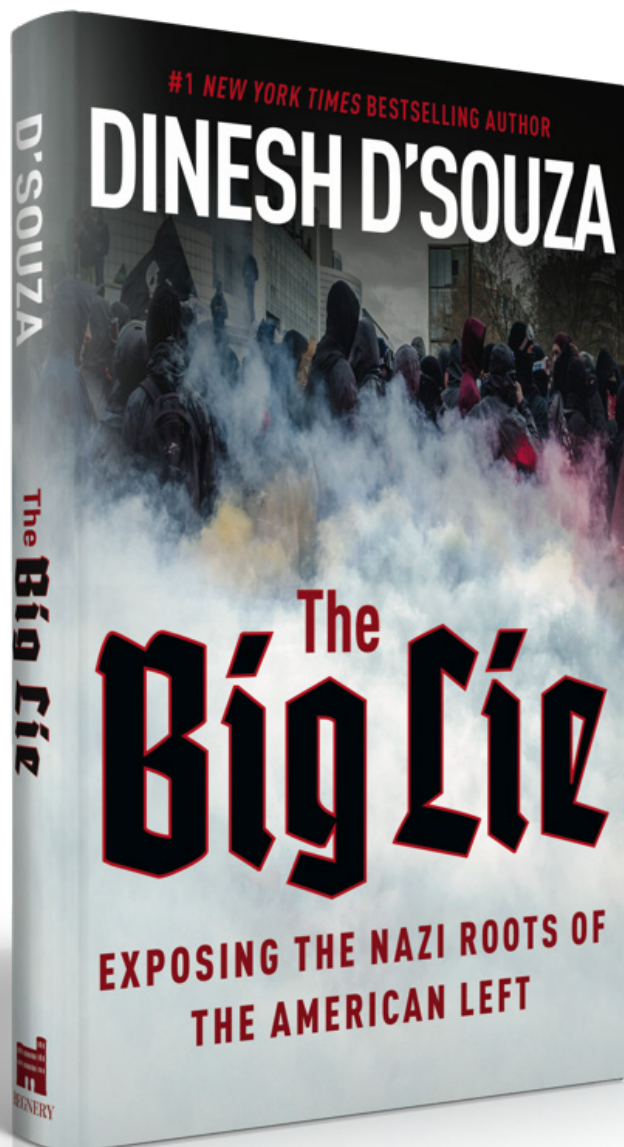
Thus, D'Souza concludes: the idea that Nazism was "right-wing" and progressivism is "left-wing" is a fabrication, designed to obscure the fact that fascism, Nazism, communism, and Democratic ideology are united by a common commitment: to the totalitarian state, and to disguising racism beneath the rhetoric of social improvement. And today, when progressives criticize Donald Trump as a "fascist," the same thing is going on. In fact, *they* are the fascists: they are the ones who believe in silencing other people, by shutting down conservative speakers. They are the ones who believe in racism, through affirmative action and the continuation of eugenics through abortion. Conservatives are for individual liberty, Democratic progressives are for the totalitarian state, and thus just like Wilson and FDR, it is they who are the fascists.

ALRIGHT, SO WE CAN SEE HOW EVERYTHING GOES off the rails when D'Souza tries to talk about the present. In these parts, the arguments really are of the "Hitler was a vegetarian" type. At one point, D'Souza even says that because Nazis were interested in race, and Democrats are interested in race, Democrats are Nazis. D'Souza also tries to conclude, from the argument presented, that we should reduce taxes on the wealthy and repeal Obamacare, because it's the only way to fight fascism. The explanation, to the extent it can be discerned, is that because Mussolini controlled the economy, and because FDR liked Mussolini and also wanted to "control the economy," all government intervention in the economy makes you Mussolini. This reasoning... does not hold up.

The rest of this is easy enough to decimate, too. D'Souza's tactic is to show that in the past, a number of people who have used the word "Democrat" to describe themselves have done horrific things. First, of course, today's Democratic Party might share the name of Andrew Jackson's Democratic Party, but that does not make today's Democrats Jacksonians. But, more importantly, if you define yourself not primarily as a "Democrat" but as an "opponent of horrific things," D'Souza has proved nothing whatsoever about your politics. If your loyalty is not to a label but to

some consistent set of principles, you have nothing to fear from D'Souza exposing the history of the Democratic Party as a history of slavery, eugenics, and terrorism. Yes, it's true, if you're invested in proving that Woodrow Wilson and FDR were admirable, a lot of the facts in the book may make you uncomfortable. If you want to salvage the reputation of Harvard and the *New Republic*, you're going to have a tough time. But if your starting point is "Racism, slavery, murder, and totalitarianism are bad things," then this book's criticisms do not affect your kind of leftism in the slightest.

The funny thing about all of this is that half of it could have been written by Howard Zinn or Noam Chomsky. *The Big Lie* is unusual for a conservative book, in that it doesn't try to white-wash the history of slavery or the genocide of Native Americans. D'Souza calls it genocide, and he goes into detail comparing life on slave plantations to life in German concentration camps. He shows how the history of America contains a long track record of lynchings, forced sterilizations, and massacres. He admits that the Nazis took direct inspiration from U.S. laws, and says that even the Nazis found the American "one-drop rule" for determining "black blood" to be too strict. But for D'Souza, none of this indicts "The



United States.” It indicts “Democrats” and “progressives.”

It’s kind of a novel argument, honestly. I’ve certainly never heard it before. Usually conservatives seem to want to justify the internment of the Japanese, or to emphasize that most Indians died from diseases rather than direct killing. They wouldn’t be terribly comfortable with the idea that American laws inspired the Nazis, because they like to think of America as, on the whole, pretty racially fair with the regrettable exception of slavery. Not D’Souza. He admits all of it, but says it was the liberals who did it.

As I say, logically speaking, this is not an effective maneuver, because it only works against someone who is trying to salvage the reputation of early 20th century Democrats. If you’re a libertarian socialist like Zinn or Chomsky, and you are a committed opponent of every kind of tyranny, whether it calls itself progressive or not, D’Souza has just proved your entire case for you. If you are like George Orwell, a socialist whose socialism is defined in part by its skepticism of state power, it means nothing

sible for it. But the book is deeper than it looks: D’Souza has done some research, and has long discussions of the proto-fascist syndicalism of Georges Sorel and Lenin’s ideas about imperialism. It’s sophistry, but sophistry works. Certainly, D’Souza’s book is better than large amounts of the dreary nonfiction that comes from our side, which is not nearly this accessible or clear. He actually responds to anticipated counterarguments, and has clearly read a lot of left writing, which is more than can be said for leftists who comment on the right. I don’t wish we wrote books this dishonest, but I do wish we wrote books this readable.

IT’S TIME TO START TAKING THIS STUFF SERIOUSLY. Historians have got to respond to books like D’Souza’s, and they have to do so in depth. They need to concede the points that are right, and vigorously contest the points that are wrong. It may seem like this is “beneath criticism,” but nothing is beneath criticism if large numbers of people believe it. And while Dinesh D’Souza may

“*Ideas like these can grow in the dark, and by the time you notice them, it may be too late to stop them.*”


for anyone to prove that Hitler said he was against capitalism. (Although Hitler also clarified in 1930: “Our adopted term ‘Socialist’ has nothing to do with Marxian Socialism. Marxism is anti-property; true socialism is not” and said that socialism in the leftist sense was “a Jewish conspiracy.”) If you are like the endless numbers of socialists who have despised racism and totalitarianism, and *haven’t* flirted with state-worship, every argument in this book can instantly be proved worthless.

Why, then, do I think the book is effective? Because the argument is still a well-crafted piece of sophistry, backed with some solid, though dishonestly selected, historical sources. (I say “solid” because he relies on mainstream liberal historians like Eric Foner, Ira Katznelson, and Timothy Snyder, and “dishonestly” because D’Souza selects everything that could support the idea of a “liberal” sympathy for fascism and ignored every piece of evidence of a right-wing sympathy for fascism; he plays up the “socialist” element in National Socialism even though this was trivial, while ignoring the “national” aspect, which was the center of the doctrine. He has to, because leftists have historically been defined by their skepticism of nationalism: “Workers of the world, unite!”) And a lot of people *do* identify themselves more by labels than principles, downplaying the crimes committed by their “side” and highlighting those committed by the other side.

So, yes, the book is full of silly arguments, using endless “guilty by association” type fallacies, selecting its evidence prejudicially, and relying on the ludicrous idea that if ever a “Democrat” did something, then Barack Obama can essentially be held respon-

appear a laughingstock from the vantage point of the academy and the press, his books continue to quietly sell tens of thousands of copies.

And that’s scary. Because this book isn’t innocuous. D’Souza’s ultimate conclusions are downright frightening. Just as certain parts of the left believe that if someone is a “fascist,” they no longer have rights and you can do as you please to them, D’Souza calls for all-out war on the left, which he says is necessary to stop “Nazism”: “This will require, from the Right, a new creativity, a new resolve, and a new willingness to use lawful physical force. Anyone who says physical force is out of bounds does not know what it means to stop fascism.” People should be “duct taping Antifa thugs to lampposts,” D’Souza says, and “we should not hesitate to unleash the law and the police on these leftist brownshirts.” He advocates using every arm of the government as a means of political repression, saying that Trump should “deploy the IRS, the NSA, and the FBI against the Left” and should stuff the Supreme Court with as many openly ideological justices as possible. All of this is legitimate, he says, because it is exactly what the “left” does, and anything is justified in beating them. It’s a chilling conclusion. But it’s all the more reason not to ignore the people who purchase books like this. Like toxic fungi, ideas like these can grow in the dark, and by the time you notice them, it may be too late to stop them. I don’t know who the “real” Nazis are, but I certainly know I don’t want to be on the receiving end of whatever is directed against those who end up tagged with the label. ❖



DON'T LET YOUR CHILDREN GROW UP TO BE LITERARY THEORISTS

*"Well, your first mistake is talking about
what Dickens was 'trying' to do. There's
a thing called The Death of the Author.*

*You probably haven't heard of it, but
it's similar to Nietzsche's Death of God.*

Have you ever read Nietzsche?"



