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LAURA MARSH

IT'S TIME TO RETHINK HIGHER ED
INDIGO OLIVIER

THE NEW REPUBLIC

October 2023

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But what do we do with an entire traumatized nation?

ANA MARIE COX

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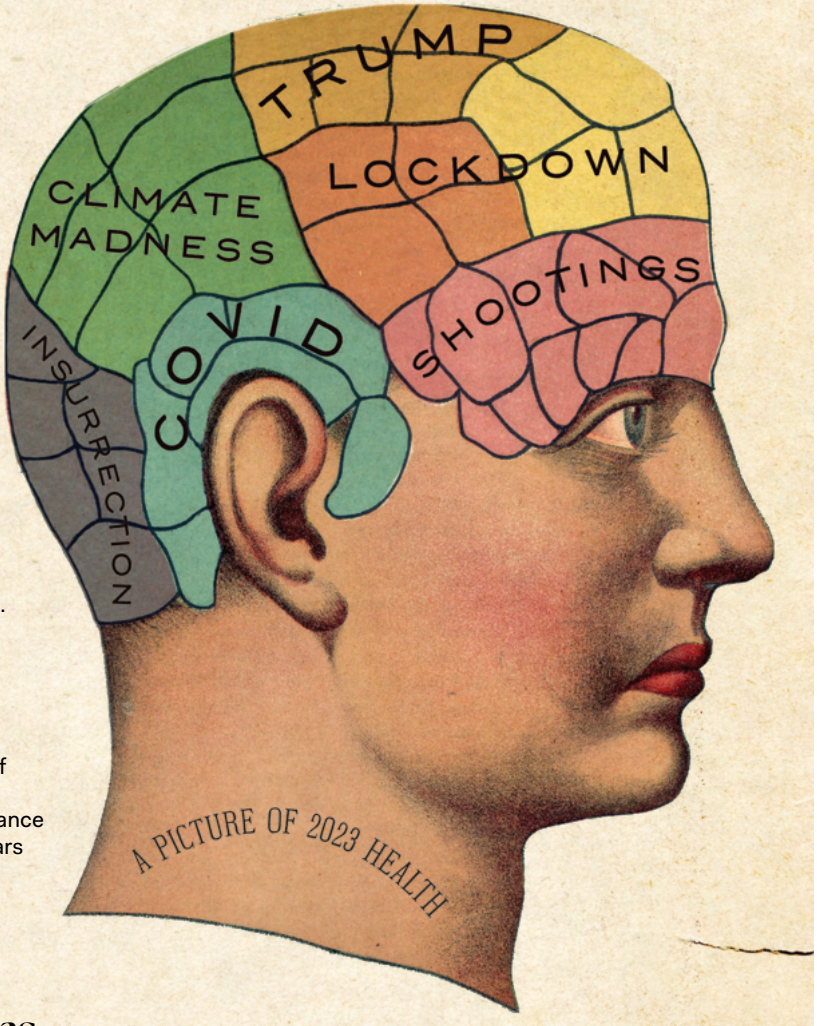

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Former President Donald Trump delivered a video address to CPAC Budapest in the spring.

TIBOR ILLYES/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

Hungarians at the Gate

Does the growing alliance between right-wingers in the U.S. and Hungary make any sense?

By Emily Tamkin

"KEEP ON FIGHTING, Mr. President!" Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told former U.S. President Donald Trump in a tweet in April. "Come back, Mr. President!" he said a month later, while urging Trump to "make America great again and bring us peace." The Trump campaign was reportedly urged by David Cornstein, Trump's former ambassador to Hungary, to take on Árpád Habony, an Orbán adviser. Meanwhile, Republicans like Arizona's Representative Paul Gosar and former gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake traveled to Budapest in the spring for a conference.

The story of Hungarian and Republican cooperation stretches back more than a decade, though it has deepened in recent years as the GOP holds up the Central European nation as a model of right-wing, anti-woke governance. But it does raise the question: Why is the leader of a Central European country so involved in U.S. Republican Party politics?

"I think, ultimately, it's the product of good political instincts," said Gergely Romsics, senior research fellow at the Research Center for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Orbán wanted to expand his international profile and connection to the international right—and the American right in particular. It took a while—several years, in fact—but he finally found a way to do it.

THE EARLY ATTEMPTS were not successful.

Before Orbán assumed the prime ministership for the second time in 2010, he and his

party, Fidesz, used what they could to attack the party in power—a left-of-center governing coalition. Ironically, given how friendly Fidesz would go on to be to Moscow, one line of attack was that the government was too friendly with the Kremlin. And so these early efforts to connect to U.S. Republicans, Romsics said, emphasized the importance of Atlantic alliances, presumably at least in part to distinguish Fidesz from the party in power at the time and to raise Orbán's international reputation.

But these early Atlanticist efforts did not take hold, and Orbán and Fidesz quickly changed tack; by 2014, Orbán was talking about building an illiberal democracy and, joining with American strategists George Birnbaum and Arthur Finkelstein, made attacking the Budapest-born billionaire philanthropist George Soros—already a prominent target for the American right—a focal point of that effort. That same year, Hungary hired former Florida Representative Connie Mack IV as a lobbyist.

Then came the European migrant crisis of 2015, which was "really a turning point both for Orbán's politics in Europe as well as for right-of-center American politicians," said former Republican Hill staffer Scott Cullinane. Orbán seized the moment, pushing out conspiracies alleging that Soros was funding the influx of migrants in an effort to change Europe's demographics. Presidential candidate Trump made attacking migrants a focal point of his first campaign, too. And when Trump truly emerged as a force in American politics, "Orbán's political instincts say, 'this is a fighting chance'" to gain influence, Romsics said. Beginning in 2016, Fidesz notables seemed to more frequently be in the United States.

The Trump era was at least as fruitful as Fidesz had hoped. The two leaders saw eye to eye on immigration. Both were happy to attack Soros and overstate the impact of his donations to liberal causes and his sinister—in their view—influence on global politics. Orbán even got a White House visit in 2019. He found fellow travelers in other like-minded U.S. politicians; legislation recently passed in Florida on LGBTQ rights and education on LGBTQ issues bears a striking resemblance to a law passed in Budapest in 2021. In 2022, Trump endorsed Orbán for reelection; earlier this year, Orbán repaid the favor, saying he hoped Trump would once again be elected to the White House.

Trump's 2020 electoral loss has made things in Washington considerably worse for Orbán and his allies. "They really burned all the bridges with the [Biden] administration, Democratic lawmakers, more centrist or center-right Republicans," said Dalibor Rohac, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. "All they are left with are these sort of MAGA, culture war–driven folks." Take Matt Schlapp, chair of the American Conservative Union, who in 2022 tweeted in defense of Orbán: "Yes, we support leaders who reject globalism, socialism, illegal migration and care about defending families, national sovereignty, and traditional values." Or consider Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, who has lauded Orbán's border policies.

Rather than reverse course, though, the Hungarian government and its allies are doubling down. For example, Mathias Corvinus Collegium, or MCC, a private college overseen by Orbán's political director, Balázs Orbán (no relation), has seen an influx of investment and is perceived as a place where American and Hungarian conservatives can convene. (Fidesz critics allege that this is being done via theft of public funds.)

Meanwhile, the American right increasingly sees Hungary as a model for their own efforts and hold it aloft as the ultimate achievement of their political project.

In 2022, Tucker Carlson—then still Fox News' golden boy—put out a documentary praising Orbán's Hungary. The film featured Rod Dreher, a writer and editor who lives in and regularly extols the virtues of Hungary. The Conservative Political Action Conference has twice gone to Budapest (and has also hosted Orbán stateside). The self-described main organizer of Hungary's CPAC conferences is the Budapest-based Center for Fundamental Rights, which "considers preserving national identity, sovereignty, and Judeo-Christian social traditions as its primary mission."

Fidesz did, at one point, appear to be cultivating relationships with more people than Trump. Hungarian President Katalin Novák met with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis in March—but, per Romsics, the Hungarian powers that be have since decided "Trump will have the [Republican] nomination. It's either Trump or no one."

"They really hope that Trump or a Trumpist president comes back," said Zsuzsanna Szelényi, director of the Democracy Institute Leadership Academy for Central and Eastern Europe. "Then Fidesz would gain more importance at the international level."

"It's important for them," Szelényi added. "They are preparing for the global radical right's victory."

AFP/GETTY

NEVER FORGET

A brief look back at the chaos of Donald Trump's White House at this time five years ago.

TRAGEDY

On October 2, 2018, *Washington Post* journalist and American resident Jamal Khashoggi was lured into Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Istanbul and murdered by Saudi agents. His murder was ordered by Saudi crown prince and de facto head of state Mohammed bin Salman, in retaliation for Khashoggi's criticism of both corruption within his home country and its brutal war in Yemen. A month later, amid ongoing criticism of Trump's unwillingness to name ally Saudi Arabia as the culprit, he effectively shrugged off the killing. "America First! The world is a very dangerous place!" his statement said.

FARCE

Writing anonymously in *The New York Times*, a "senior official" in the Trump administration claimed to be "part of the resistance" bent on halting the president's most heinous and authoritarian acts. What did that mean, precisely? It wasn't entirely clear. The author insisted that their cohort was working behind the scenes "to preserve our democratic institutions while thwarting Mr. Trump's more misguided impulses." But they also endorsed some of the president's policies, particularly "effective deregulation, historic tax reform, [the] more robust military" that Trump had brought about. The senior official was later revealed to be Miles Taylor, chief of staff at the Department of Homeland Security—ground zero of Trump's abhorrent immigration policy.

FASCIST

In late October, Trump told Axios that he planned to remove birthright citizenship via executive order. "It was always told to me that you needed a constitutional amendment. Guess what? You don't," he said. The executive order never came about, but Trump has long targeted birthright citizenship and has done so again on the 2024 campaign trail. TNR

FOR ALL THE ways in which the American and Hungarian right insist they are like-minded, the truth is that there are significant differences on policy that boosters of the relationship consistently paper over.

While it is true that Fidesz speaks often of the importance of the Christian family, the Hungarian government encourages reproduction by effectively boosting welfare. In April, the government insisted that supermarkets should put promotions in place, offering sales on a different kind of product each week. In 2019, Orbán promised that women with more than four children would not have to pay income tax; his government said it would help families with more than three children purchase cars and offered parental leave for grandparents, more places in nursery schools, and repayments of up to 10 million forints (about $30,000) for loans taken out by families with two or more children. Though some on the American right have gestured at borrowing from Fidesz's natalism, these efforts have practically no chance of being adopted by the GOP: The modern Republican Party is seeking to cut, not expand, support from the state.

And though Orbán has taken some steps to make it more difficult to get an abortion—last year announcing, for example, that pregnant people must prove they have listened to the fetus's heartbeat before having one—peeling back abortion rights has not been a part of Fidesz's program. Orbán "could not say abortion is not possible," said Szelényi, herself a former Fidesz member. It isn't even that Hungarians are especially pro-choice, but that access to abortion is understood as "a given right."

Orbán "is very good at gauging audiences and crafting messages that resonate," said Rohac. "I am pretty sure that when these people come here [from Hungary], they'll tell a different story to American social conservatives that these people want to hear," he said. And, indeed, in 2019, the Hungarian government hosted two separate events—one in the Library of Congress and one on the Hill—on family policy and the role of the family. The former was titled "Making Families Great Again."

For Fidesz and its allies on the American right, symbolism, tone, and gestures all matter more than policy overlap, particularly on the domestic front.

"Even if details are a little vague or don't quite map onto domestic U.S. politics, you still have a right-of-center politician vanquishing the left," Cullinane said of Orbán and Fidesz.

ON FOREIGN POLICY, too, what might have once been assumed to be enough to rupture a partnership has been shrugged off. Orbán has repeatedly stalled Sweden's NATO membership bid (to say nothing of Hungary's opposition to EU plans to grant additional money to Ukraine). These are matters not only of domestic politics, but of international security.

"If that's not the turning point, what would be the turning point?" Cullinane asked. "It's really hard to imagine what more Orbán could do that would cause this relationship to break or to turn back in some way. It's really hard to imagine."

And, in truth, there are many in the Republican Party—including Trump and DeSantis—who have called U.S. support for NATO and Ukraine into question. What might once have been a point of deep divergence is now an area of overlap.

Granted, that this is the way things are now does not mean that it is the way they will always be. Hungarian and American right-wingers are not necessarily destined to be in an alliance with each other

WHO SAID IT?

Josh Hawley or Ron Swanson

Earlier this year, Missouri Senator Josh Hawley published *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs*, dedicated to curing what ails his countrymen (liberalism, mostly, but also "emasculating" work like teaching). Hawley thus joins a long line of mansplainers, from Jordan Peterson to *Parks and Recreation*'s Ron Swanson, the libertarian head of the TV show's titular department. Hawley possesses none of Swanson's deadpan charm, but does share his disdain for those in need—and for government that tries to help.

1. **"A man who wants to be free must order himself and his soul, because only then will he have the capacity to do what liberty means to do: to rule."**
2. **"Capitalism: God's way of determining who is smart and who is poor."**
3. **"No menace to this nation is greater than the collapse of American manhood."**
4. **"I would rather bleed out than sit here and talk about my feelings for 10 minutes."**
5. **"Relationships are risky. They are difficult. Porn, by contrast, is cheap and easy. It's safe."**
6. **"Dependence is in fact a temptation to every man, in every age. It is the temptation to let someone else do it for you."**
7. **"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Don't teach a man how to fish, and you feed yourself. He's a grown man, and fishing's not that hard."**
8. **"I'm not interested in caring about people."**
9. **"Home is a promise given to a husband, made possible only by a wife."**
10. **"An ideal night out, to me, is stepping onto my porch area and grilling up a thick slab of something's flesh and then popping in a highlight reel from the WNBA."**

CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY; NBC UNIVERSAL/GETTY

Answers: 1. Hawley 2. Swanson 3. Hawley 4. Swanson 5. Hawley 6. Hawley 7. Swanson 8. Swanson 9. Hawley 10. Swanson

forever. In August, the United States limited Hungary's participation in its visa waiver program. Though this decision was obviously made by a Democratic administration, it could ultimately have knock-on effects for Hungary-U.S. relations more generally and impact the next Republican administration, whenever it takes office.

democracies. Orbán is also a subsidized strongman. But "the EU puts some outer limits on what he can do and how far he can go," Kelemen said.

And while certain Republican politicians may not care that Orbán and company are making things more difficult for NATO and Ukraine, Fidesz is also taking a softer,

If Trump wins again, Hungarian fortunes with respect to U.S. foreign policy will improve.

There is also the fact that, at least in theory, the European Union should serve as something of a check on Hungary if it decides to descend completely into authoritarianism. R. Daniel Kelemen, a professor of public policy at Georgetown, likened it to individual U.S. states from the late-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century that received funding from the federal government even while functioning as one-party states, not competitive

more cooperative approach toward another country, one that its Republican allies see as a clear foe: China. While Trump consistently bashed China and DeSantis recently unveiled an economic plan apparently intended to take on Beijing, Hungary has talked up "opportunities rather than risks." In May, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described relations between the two countries as having entered their "best period in history."

DESPITE THEIR DIFFERENCES on policy, there is little reason to expect a crack-up between the Hungarian and American right in the near future.

For the American political right, Hungary offers a place to point to, an idea, an inspiration. In reality, however, it's a relatively small country with a declining population and minimal global influence. But why should such details matter? "True ideologues of the new right want to be able to point to examples of how they want to structure society," Rohac said.

And for the Hungarians?

Romsics pointed to those good political instincts. "Logic dictates there's a polarized society that is a great power, a superpower. With one side, your relationships are so bad that there's nothing much you can do. With the other, you have a fighting chance."

There just isn't that much to lose, he said. If Trump wins again, Hungarian fortunes with respect to U.S. foreign policy will improve.

And if Democrats win? "Will it really get that much worse?" TNR

Emily Tamkin *is a global affairs journalist and author of* The Influence of Soros *and* Bad Jews.

School's Out

College is unaffordable for millions. It's time to rethink higher education.

By Indigo Olivier

Illustration by Alex Nabaum

FOR MILLIONS OF students, the global pandemic fundamentally altered one of the most important questions many young people face: Is going to college worth the cost? Suddenly without the dorms, dining halls, and larger "college experience," a few hours of remote instruction spent tucked away in their childhood home looked different. Even after colleges and universities opened their doors again, the doubt persisted. After years of skyrocketing expenses, many had hit a breaking point, questioning not just whether a degree was worth what is, for some, decades in debt, but also what it is we pay for when we pay for a college education.

The high cost of higher ed has long been rationalized as a down payment on a better future, an investment in skills that will translate into over a million dollars in additional lifetime earnings when compared to those with only a high school diploma. But as the return on investment declines, many young people are no longer buying that story. Today, a majority of Americans—56 percent, according to a March survey from *The Wall Street Journal*—believe college is no longer worth the price. And yet, American policies and politics remain stuck in an era when a year of college cost a fraction of what it does today.

Every year, millions of students decide to take out a mortgage on their futures because they believe it is the price they have to pay to access a plethora of jobs that would otherwise be inaccessible. These are jobs that include "perks" like health care, paid time off, and—if you're lucky—retirement benefits. Today, the average price of admission to this workforce is more than $37,000 a year—for four years. A degree, of course, doesn't guarantee one of these jobs. But it is necessary to be considered for many of them.

Higher education has long been treated as a placebo for deep inequalities, even as it has rapidly grown more unaffordable. It is, in many ways, emblematic of America's hyper-individualism and resistance toward solving structural problems: Hard work—in the form of studying, winning prizes and scholarships, and grinding through challenging subjects—could lift anyone out of poverty. This line of thinking conveniently blames low earners without college degrees for their predicament and implicitly provides an argument against expanding the welfare state or raising the minimum wage.

As the cost of college soared, many still clung on to the promise that the price was self-evidently worth it—even as tuition outpaced inflation several times over. Pointing to a 14 percent annual rate of return calculated by the Federal Reserve, Princeton University's president wrote in April that "it is hard to conceive of a more reliable and cost-effective investment than attending and completing college." His op-ed for *The Washington Post* failed to mention that this figure, by the Fed's own admission, has declined in recent years because of rising tuition.

Today, there's growing recognition that this system isn't only broken, it's rigged in favor of the wealthy. A 2022 federal lawsuit brought against 17 of the country's most elite universities, including Yale, Columbia, and MIT, is litigating as much.

These universities were allowed to form a consensus on how financial aid packages were determined, thanks to a federal antitrust law signed by Bill Clinton in 1994. Under the auspices of the Improving America's Schools Act, these schools claimed they were exempt from antitrust laws because they practiced "need-blind admissions," in which an applicant's financial circumstances are not considered as part of admission. The suit, however, alleges that these schools routinely favored the children of wealthy donors when selecting applicants and accuses these schools of "participat[ing] in a price-fixing cartel that is designed to reduce or eliminate financial aid as a locus of competition," which "artificially inflated the net price of attendance for students receiving financial aid." In mid-August, the University of Chicago agreed to pay $13.5 million to settle such claims.

As elite universities allow wealthy and "legacy" applicants preferred entry, the burden of student loans falls on others. Two-thirds of the nation's student debt is carried by women, with Black women shouldering a disproportionate burden—a reality that flies in the face of popular narratives about relief being a handout to the already privileged.

Meanwhile, a 2018 report from the Roosevelt Institute suggests we've been thinking about the economics of college education completely backward. Analyzing census data comparing educational attainment across racial demographics with median earnings, Julie Margetta Morgan and Marshall Steinbaum conclude, "to the extent that individuals see an income boost based on college attainment, it is only relative to falling wages for high school graduates." This is especially problematic for college graduates of color who, as Morgan and Steinbaum point out, "have to pursue more education than their peers for the same or similar positions."

Once Black college graduates are in these positions, they have a harder time keeping up with their payments and are three times more likely to default. A 2019 study from Brandeis University found that, after two decades, the typical white borrower had just 6 percent of their loan balance remaining, whereas the typical Black borrower still owed 95 percent of their initial loan. In other words, after 20 years of repayment, a typical white borrower was nearly finished, while Black borrowers had barely touched the principal. For this reason, the NAACP has been advocating for a minimum of $50,000 in student loan relief.

Student debt relief and large-scale public investment in universities that are committed to keeping costs down for students will undoubtedly be a huge part of addressing the student debt crisis. But the complexity of the problem necessitates broader policy shifts, particularly when it comes to labor.

President Joe Biden has taken commendable steps in this direction by coupling investments in public education with alternative, noncollege pathways to good jobs. Under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, CHIPS Act, and Inflation Reduction Act, his administration is working with unions, community organizations, schools, and employers to expand training programs in broadband, construction, and electrification.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, for instance, is implementing a program to equip trainees with the tools needed to install and maintain EV charging stations, while the AFL-CIO, in partnership with the Departments of Labor and Energy, is piloting training programs for lithium-battery manufacturing—an effort even Joe Manchin has been able to get behind.

Recognizing that college does not come with the guarantee of a living wage, young people are turning toward labor organizing in hopes of securing a brighter future. According to a 2022 study from Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, "unionization throughout one's career is associated with a $1.3 million mean increase in lifetime earnings, larger than the average gains from completing college." It should come as no surprise, then, that Starbucks baristas at more than 350 cafés across the country have thrown themselves into successfully organizing unions.

Moving beyond the question of whether college is worth the cost requires a shift in how we perceive higher education.

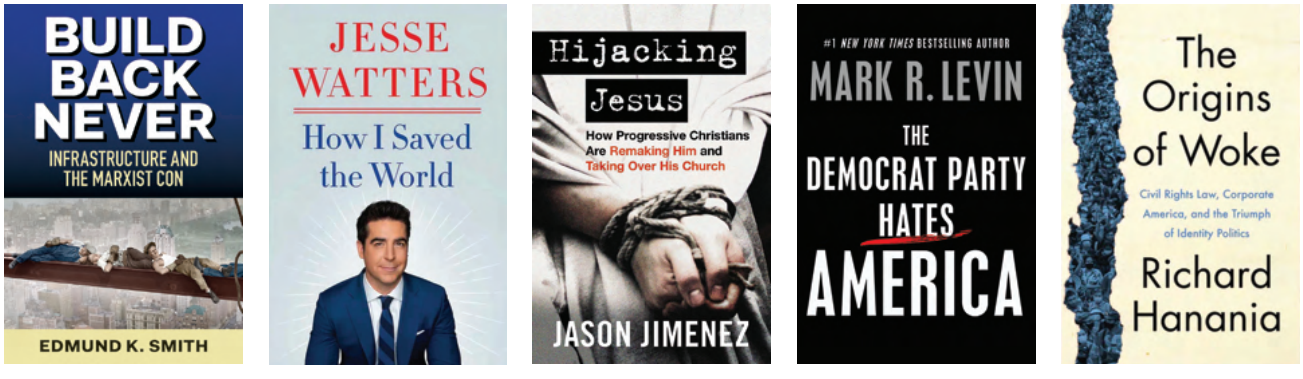
Moving beyond the question of whether college is worth the cost requires a shift in how we perceive higher education. It requires us to stop equating an education with preparation for the workforce. It requires us to recognize that encouraging everyone to get a four-year degree as a substitute for serious labor policy was doomed from the beginning. Perhaps hardest of all, it requires us to recognize that the true value of an education should not and cannot be quantified by its economic return alone.

Biden's student debt relief program is itself an acknowledgment that the system is broken. But it doesn't go nearly far enough. It is means-tested and limited to between $10,000 and $20,000 per borrower, both points that concede to conservative arguments. The administration's shift in direction after the Supreme Court blocked its efforts to cancel more than $400 billion in student loans has been far more conservative than earlier efforts. Worst of all, the administration has not done nearly enough for those borrowers who need the most relief.

Biden now has the chance to tell a new story about who's gotten ahead and who's been left behind in this economy. In an election year, it will be an important one, especially given his recent struggles to woo young voters. Let's hope he tells the right one. TNR

Indigo Olivier *is a reporter-researcher at* The New Republic.

SPOT THE FAKE RIGHT-WING BOOK TITLE



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Answer: *Build Back Never*

Mission: Impossible

The Wall Street Journal's desperate search for the perfect anti-Trump Republican candidate

By Walter Shapiro

Illustration by Mark Harris

AS PRINT FADES, so do the old-fashioned joys of following the ideological contortions of a newspaper editorial page. *The New York Times* signaled the looming demise of the art form when it drastically cut back the frequency of its editorials. Fortunately, we still have the Rupert Murdoch–owned *Wall Street Journal*, as it desperately gropes toward finding a 2024 Republican presidential candidate who meets its many fine-grained specifications.

For all the obsessive attention lavished on Fox News, the *Journal*'s traditionally conservative editorial page offers a much clearer window into the Murdoch mindset. As the emails and memos released in the Dominion lawsuit demonstrated, the right-wing television network embraced nutcase conspiracy theories about the 2020 election because it feared losing viewers in the fever swamps of Trumpian hysteria. But about as many people subscribe to the *Journal* for its editorials as read Dickens for the sex scenes. That gives longtime editorial page editor Paul Gigot and his staff free range, with Murdoch looking distantly over their shoulders.

Always uncomfortable with Donald Trump's America First populism and bombast, the *Journal*'s three-page print editorial section turned on the defrocked president with a fury the day after the 2022 midterm elections. Not only did the *Journal* headline its lead editorial "TRUMP IS THE REPUBLICAN PARTY'S BIGGEST LOSER," but it also ran three other op-eds belittling the sneering face of the GOP. Since then, the edit page has not softened its view of Trump personally, although each indictment has been dismissed as prosecutorial overreach by forces aligned with Joe Biden. In early August, after federal prosecutor Jack Smith brought a four-count indictment against Trump for trying to overturn the election, the *Journal* began its editorial by declaring, "Donald Trump's post-election behavior in 2020 was deceitful and destructive, and his malfeasance on Jan. 6, 2021, was disgraceful." The *Journal* followed up the next week by flatly declaring, "The risk of nominating former President Trump is that everything else will be drowned out by arguments about whether he should go to prison for trying to overturn the 2020 election or delete Mar-a-Lago's security tapes to hide documents."

But if not Trump for president, then who? And can any non-Trump Republican candidate check all the boxes the *Journal* needs them to: hawkish, anti-populist and, perhaps above all, viable?

Even though the *Journal* does not formally endorse candidates, the editorial page is adept at putting a thumb on the scale.

Even though the *Journal* does not formally endorse candidates, the editorial page is adept at putting a thumb on the scale. During the heady days of spring, the *Journal*'s editorial writers, like so many orthodox Republicans, were beguiled by the *idea* of Ron DeSantis. When the Florida governor declared his candidacy in May, the *Journal* burbled, "The acid test of leadership is how someone responds in a crisis, and Mr. DeSantis showed both the discipline to master the subject and the courage to defy elite opinion for the larger public good."

But the *Journal*'s honeymoon with Trump's leading challenger lasted about as long as the tenure of a DeSantis campaign manager. The Florida governor has flunked the editorial page's litmus test issues as fast as the state banned advanced placement exams. The paper's efforts to serve as the Henry Higgins to his floundering campaign came to naught.

In early July, the *Journal*, which has long taken a Chamber of Commerce pro-immigration position, criticized DeSantis for echoing the nativist right's "fallacy that illegal immigrants are taking U.S. jobs." Equally concerning for the hawkish *Journal* is the degree to which DeSantis has gone wobbly on Ukraine. The paper noted sadly in another July editorial about DeSantis, "[On] U.S. support for Ukraine he's too often catered to the isolationist right that would, in Ronald Reagan's words, play innocents abroad in a world that's not innocent." Then, in late July, the edit page complained, "The Governor has too often catered to putative conservative populists who want to unleash the force of government to 'own the libs' and win the culture war."

But the *Journal* still resides in a place called hope. In yet another if-he'd-only-listen-to-us-and-not-his-consultants editorial in late July, the paper lectured the governor, "He'll have to focus more on growth than on grievance. He needs a vision for American renewal that transcends Mr. Biden's plans to use big government for income redistribution and Mr. Trump's desire to use it for political 'retribution.'" Good luck with that.

The problem for Gigot and company is that they want to be part of the GOP nomination conversation rather than quixotic crusaders. As the most prominent print voice of Reagan-era conservatism, the *Journal* is not about to lavish column inches on no-hope candidates like Asa Hutchinson. In DeSantis, the editorialists thought they had found their man: someone who would sucker the Trump enthusiasts, but who, deep down, was really just like them. But so far DeSantis has bamboozled no one.

Chris Christie, in particular, presents the *Journal* with a dilemma. His vitriol-dipped contempt for Trump undoubtedly appeals to Murdoch. When the former New Jersey

GETTY (X4)

governor entered the race in June, the *Journal* gushed, "Mr. Christie's biggest appeal has always been his intelligence and tough-talking persona." Peggy Noonan, the *Journal*'s Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist who operates independently of the rest of the edit page, hailed Christie's executive abilities: "Love him or hate him, he knows what to do with power. He isn't secretly frightened of it, as many politicians are." Noonan, it should be pointed out, also earlier offered this worthy-of-*Bartlett*'s put-down of DeSantis: "He's tough, unadorned, and carries a vibe, as I've said, that he might unplug your life support to recharge his cellphone."

But Christie, despite his potential appeal to independents who can vote in the New Hampshire primary, does not have a plausible route to the nomination. Nor does Mike Pence, who, like Christie, appeals to the *Journal* partly because of his muscular support for the war in Ukraine and his free-market ideology. In mid-August, the editorial page went out of its way to praise the former veep's drill-baby-drill energy policy. While Tim Scott and Nikki Haley are acceptable to the *Journal* on most issues—despite tiptoeing around Trump—they do not arouse much active enthusiasm and were barely mentioned in the editorial columns during a full month in midsummer. In June, though, the editorial page praised Scott, the leading African American in the GOP scrum, for wanting "to free minorities from union schools and escape poverty by giving them more economic opportunity."

There is a trick for liberals in reading the *Journal*'s Opinion section without having to summon the paramedics because of apoplexy. Ignore any editorial or op-ed that mentions Hunter Biden, even if the author insists that the scandal and its cover-up are worse than the Visigoths sacking Rome. Chuckle indulgently when the *Journal* insists with pious certitude that Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito are pillars of ethical conduct who only forgot to fill out a few disclosure forms.

In exchange for glossing over this kind of right-wing claptrap, you get treats like an early August Karl Rove column that smartly pointed out, "Facing these multiple-front legal battles, Mr. Trump might not have enough campaign cash for the primaries, let alone a highly contested general election." That same day, the *Journal* schooled Vivek Ramaswamy, the biotech entrepreneur paddling furiously in the GOP candidate pool, for indulging conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks. As an editorial put it, "More such flights into political exotica will encourage many voters to conclude that Mr. Ramaswamy isn't ready for his close up, much less the demands of the Presidency." Its influence may be fading, but the *Journal* retains a clear view into what animates a certain sect of Republican power brokers, very much including Murdoch himself.

However, the real joy in reading the *Journal* editorial pages all through the 2024 campaign season will be to wait for the inevitable eureka moment. That will be when the edit staffers finally realize to their dismay that the Republican Party of their dreams—a party devoted to small government and tax-cutting rather than election denying and an authoritarian cult of personality—no longer exists. I can't wait for the angry *Journal* editorial entitled "THE PARTY'S OVER." TNR

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The pandemic. The shootings. The drug deaths. Social media. Polarization. Insurrection. Trump.

What if the horrors of the last seven years translate into a nation that is suffering more than mere political dysfunction?

What if our entire national character is a trauma response?

America the Traumatized

By Ana Marie Cox

Illustrations by Sara Gironi Carnevale

IF YOU'RE EVEN MODERATELY ONLINE, you've likely crossed paths with TraumaTok (or its cousin, TraumaGram): Lots of short videos explicating how myriad hang-ups—including perfectionism and hoarding, people-pleasing and social isolation—are "trauma responses." There's advice, too: Stimulating the vagus nerve can be a good self-soothing mechanism. What about "tapping"? That's when you tap certain pressure points of your body. Or "grounding"? That's when you wriggle your toes in the bare earth. These videos have hundreds of thousands, even millions of views.

Like any decently sized cultural trend, TraumaTok has its jokey meme side as well. I'm personally fond of the Instagram account @softcore_trauma, which overlays images of cute animals with tonally discordant therapy jargon.

You've probably seen these things because you've left a digital trail about what's bothering you these days. Is the aforementioned perfectionism interfering with your productivity? Maybe you feel as if your memory is going and want to do something about it. (Forgetfulness is also a trauma response!) You mentioned to someone the way that you still haven't been able to get back into the groove of "weekdays," and they told you "time slippage" is a trauma response, and so you finally ordered Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (as this goes to press, it is in its 156th week on *The New York Times'* bestseller list).

I am not the first person for whom the popularity of trauma content on social media triggers both recognition and suspicion. (Oversharing on social media? That's "trauma dumping," another—yes—trauma response.) Inquisitive, gently skeptical articles about a generalized "Trump trauma" that were keyed to viral tweets and, well, vibes started appearing during the 2016 campaign. Writing two weeks into Donald Trump's presidency, an editor at Yahoo might as well have created a macro for the rest of the field: "while invoking 'trauma' … may seem like an overreach to some, experts say it makes sense."

As of last year, four in 10 Americans knew at least one person who died from Covid. This year, one in five Americans knows someone who's died of a painkiller overdose. One in five knows someone who's died due to gun violence; one in six has witnessed a shooting; 21 percent have been personally threatened by a gun.

The pandemic diminished the lightly doubting tone of many reports—surely, the lockdown was traumatic!—but, surprisingly, did not end it. In 2022, an NPR story rounded up experts to comment on a survey showing a surge in people seeking mental health treatment (referrals to psychotherapists nearly doubled between 2020 and 2021). But "is it trauma?" the article asks.

Reporters for these recent pieces probing the reality of our invisible injuries routinely consult van der Kolk as an arbitrator. His declarations are consistent: He "hesitates to call [the pandemic experience] trauma" (NPR); to *The Guardian* he said, "for me and most of my colleagues, the pandemic has not been traumatic" (for first responders and frontline workers, he allowed, that's different); and in *The Atlantic* he was definitive: "When people say the pandemic has been a collective trauma … I say, absolutely not."

And that should be it, right? That's the guy who wrote the book. This average white lady, always on the alert for my own privilege, hears that demurral quite well: If we're all traumatized, that moves us further and further away from and makes us less able to respect the indisputably traumatic (war, famine, genocide, structural racism, interpersonal violence, natural disaster). And this idea that undesirable character traits are "trauma responses"—doesn't that relieve people of responsibility for their actions? Doesn't this mass identification cheapen the category of "survivor" (along with lowering the bar for "trauma" itself)? And if the mildest bit of social friction is now a medicalized artifact—or as one meme puts it, "My entire personality is a trauma response"—then are we making "normal" impossible to achieve?

Me, I think we're fucking traumatized, and at scale.

Off the Charts

IN 2017, WASHINGTON, D.C., therapist Paula Atkinson went mildly viral for posting flyers online and in doctors' offices advertising a "Trump trauma" support group. Trump, racial violence, and the crisis at the border had become daily topics in sessions, so she reasoned, "I wanted to get all these people, and this is when we could all be in the same room together."

And then, despite the clicks and the jokes, she could not gather a quorum. "Thought of signing up," one person posted on Twitter, "But then I thought, 'that's what Twitter's for.'"

The popularity of TraumaTok and the easy discussion of trauma on social media limn the edges of how badly we're coping with this thing: We are trying to find catharsis in atomization, automation, and the algorithm. We are avoiding deep vulnerability in favor of volume. But volume there is. The number of people describing themselves as survivors on social media doesn't mean our definition of trauma is too large; it could mean it's too small, only capturing those who are "out" about a diagnosis that still carries a lot of shame.

Van der Kolk's rejection of "collective trauma" is anecdotal ("for me and most of my colleagues," he said). You do not have to expand the definition of a traumatic event into the grayer areas of everyday slights and microaggressions to find millions and millions of Americans who have met with increasing levels of trauma since the Trump era began and the pandemic twisted our culture even more tightly into dysfunction.

As of last year, four in 10 Americans knew at least one person who died from Covid. This year, three in 10 Americans say they know someone who has been affected by an opioid addiction, and one in five knows someone who's died from a painkiller overdose. In 2022, more than three million adults were displaced by some form of natural disaster—that's more than three times as many displaced per year between 2008 and 2021. Last year, some cities saw a 50 percent increase in evictions over pre-pandemic levels. One in five knows someone who's died due to gun violence; one in six has witnessed a shooting; 21 percent have been personally threatened by a gun. Half of Americans know someone personally who has experienced at least one of those events.

After Trump's "grab her by" tape became public, calls to the national sexual assault hotline jumped up by 35 percent (as Michelle Goldberg observed, Trump was a walking trigger for assault survivors). During the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, calls to the sexual assault hotline spiked 201 percent. Lockdown—the first two months of the pandemic—saw a rise in intimate partner violence of 101 percent, with the rate stabilizing at an increase of about 8 percent from pre-pandemic numbers as of 2022.

And then there are the frontline workers and "essential personnel," those who risked their lives for our safety and comfort during the spring of 2020. I assume that we agree health professionals faced trauma (and may well still). There are 22 million of them in the United States, and after the pandemic, 55 percent reported experiencing burnout, and three in 10 said they were now considering leaving the profession. The 55 million essential personnel who worked through the worst days of Covid suffered a similar toll: A year into the pandemic, the American Psychiatric Association found that 34 percent of essential workers had been treated by a mental health professional, 80 percent had trouble

Study after study shows that many of those who consume media about traumatic events will develop symptoms similar to PTSD. Being glued to a screen can even be worse than actually being there; one study found that individuals who took in more than six hours of coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing in a day showed more signs of acute stress than those standing at the finish line.

over- or under-sleeping, and 39 percent said they were drinking more alcohol than they had before.

No harm at this scale, in this country, is equally distributed, a point that van der Kolk was surely weighing when he discounted the idea of collective trauma. Poor people, people of color, queer people, single people, disabled people, and the very young and the very old bore (and will always bear) a disproportionate share of the pain that wracks us.

These are traumas at the individual level in numbers so large that they demand national attention because there are national consequences—think of the nationwide therapist shortage and "the Great Resignation. "

So, what if the reason so many people identify as trauma survivors is that *they are*? What if the horrors of the last seven years *do* translate into a nation that is suffering more than mere political dysfunction? What if the polarization, paranoia, conspiracism, and hopelessness that bog us down have a more holistic origin than structural malfunctions or individual malfeasance?

What if our entire national character is a trauma response?

Before you say "bullshit," remember: Cynicism is a trauma response.

The Precipitating Events

THE ORIGIN OF the academic study of "collective trauma" has been credited to Kai Erikson's 1977 book, *Everything in Its Path*, an account of the aftermath of the Buffalo Creek flood in Logan County, West Virginia, five years prior, which killed 125 people and destroyed 550 homes in a small mining community. In the book, Erikson writes of grappling with "thousands of pages of transcript material, whole packing boxes full of it," that confounded him "not because the material is contradictory or difficult to interpret but because it is so bleakly alike." He found respondents echoing one another to a frustrating degree, so much so that "a researcher is very apt to conclude after rummaging through these data that there is really not very much to say." Eventually, however, he came to believe that the uniformity itself was meaningful; the damage done at Buffalo Creek was something more than a mere collection of individual harms.

Collective trauma, he wrote, means "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality." Collective trauma happens in slow motion, "A form of shock all the same.... 'I' continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. 'You' continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But 'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body."

In other words, the defining characteristic of collective trauma—and what makes it almost impossible to self-diagnose—is that people who have been through it no longer believe in the integrity of their community. How does anyone see themselves as a traumatized collective if no one feels that they belong?

So, pull back to the macro level. For a moment, put aside your or anyone else's individual experience. Think of the country itself as a patient.

In the past seven years, the country has sustained significant, repeated damage to its institutions. The courts, elections, law enforcement, and so on are its vital organs. Trump has been punching America in the kidneys since he first floated the idea of a "rigged election." January 6 was a heart attack. The musculature that is the justice system, well, it was always spasmodic. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery shocked many white people into awareness of our already dysfunctional law enforcement apparatus, and then the *Dobbs* decision drove home how easily the rights that support us can be yanked away. Were we ever really as strong as we thought?

The country was already weakened by Trumpism when the pandemic attacked our nervous systems more than figuratively. It cut away at the millions of tiny threads that knit up our towns and cities. Think of the loose social ties that grow from just seeing the same people at the grocery store (or the office) every day—think of *the mail*. Our national proprioception—our awareness of where our parts are in relation to one another—deteriorated. Our creaky supply chain is another symptom of this disconnect. So is "you're on mute."

If you believe there is a national respiratory system, the need for metaphors ends. This summer, many of us could barely breathe.

Secondary trauma comes with bearing witness to tragedy. At that initial you-can't-argue-your-way-out-of-it-this-is-trauma individual level, the stress ate away at the well-being of first responders, critical care workers, and mental health professionals. But when the nation is the patient, the secondary trauma comes from witnessing what we're doing to ourselves. Study after study shows that many of those who consume media about traumatic events will develop symptoms similar to PTSD. Being glued to a screen can even be worse than actually being there; one study found that individuals who took in more than six hours of coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing in a day showed more signs of acute stress than those standing at the finish line. I'm not sure if

the number of hours of pandemic coverage and the viewership it garnered can even be counted.

We can tabulate the numbers for other horrors, though. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox all set network records for daytime viewership on January 6—8.9 million, 5.5 million, and 5.7 million, respectively. Across broadcast and cable, over 28 million people saw an unprecedented peacetime attack against our nation's capital. Seventy-nine percent of Americans—that's four out of five of us—say they saw the George Floyd video.

These traumas cascade and compound. Research on media consumption of traumatic events reveals an unsurprising and potentially ruinous spiral: Traumatized people seek out information about the events they've experienced to make sense of them. (Which may explain why a majority of those who watched January 6 unfold—20 million—also watched the hearings.) This leads to further trauma, which leads to more media consumption, and so on and so on. Black people have necessarily learned this lesson over a long history of exposure to both violence and media depictions of it; asking well-meaning folks to stop posting videos of atrocities has become as much a part of the ritual of mourning as marches and memorials.

These recent large-scale hurts magnify one another because they are so tightly grouped together; they are especially deep because we have come to understand every single one of them as a betrayal: It wasn't supposed to be this way. The government was supposed to work. The planet shouldn't turn on us. We are a democracy with an orderly and peaceful transition of power. Children should not be shot at school.

Admittedly, these promises have only spotty integrity over the centuries (some of them were never really true). Today, they are all being broken simultaneously. As we experience betrayals again and again, the breaches of trust become both more impersonal and less coherent. There is no one person to blame, but we also can't write off our tragedy to a twist of fate. What we have been through couldn't have happened to just anyone. We cannot exactly follow the chain of causation to a single intelligible event, and yet there is nothing about our experience that's an accident.

Whether physical or mental, individual or collective, to inflict trauma is to damage a connection: a bone is fractured, the blood vessels under the skin blossom into bruise; or a heart broken, a relationship ruptured, trust ruined. The healthy response to trauma is to set things right again. You sew up the laceration, set the bone; bring the community together, make amends, apologize. In contrast, unhealthy trauma responses don't address the damage. They focus desperately on keeping the original event from ever happening again, to the exclusion of repairing wounds.

The exact forms of safety-seeking look discordant only when we compare individuals. For some, perfectionism is a talisman of protection ("If I'm good enough, I'll be safe"), but for others, hoarding is a hedge against imagined impending calamity. ("If I never let go of anything, I'll never be caught unprepared.")

Generalized across millions, the nation-patient's trauma responses manifest in more consistent forms. We've lowered our expectations and raised our level of paranoia to keep from getting hurt in the future; we indulge in distraction and deadening the senses to guard against thinking about what happened in the past.

Wary of the Future: Hypervigilance and Denial

AMERICANS DON'T BELIEVE good news anymore. Rocked by disasters, we refuse to recognize that the future might contain anything but more of them.

The economy rollicks along. Most economists say it is "fully recovered" since the Covid blows of 2020 (if also, as with harm, recovery is unevenly distributed). The Fed seems poised to thread the needle on inflation without causing a recession, and the supply chain's disconnected segments inch toward one another. Crime, after surging during lockdown, is trending down again. We have treatments and have some control over the disease that kept us inside for over a year.

But we're on edge anyway. No doubt, there is much to be concerned about in the year of our Lord 2023, but what's suggestive of our emotional impairment is that we refuse to see what's improved.

In January, Gallup asked Americans about 2023. Sixty-three percent said that the stock market would fall (the NASDAQ is up 37 percent, the S&P 500 18 percent); 72 percent said crime rates would rise (compared to 2022, violent crime from January to June 2023 had fallen in almost every category). In general, more Americans than ever (69 percent) say they're pessimistic about the future of the economy; the smallest minority in one poll's 17-year history says it's a good time to invest in the stock market (24 percent). The number of people who have completed at least three of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's 12 recommended disaster preparedness activities went from 46 percent in 2017 to 59 percent in 2021.

With the pandemic, gun sales soared to their highest since January 2013, following Barack Obama's reelection and the Sandy

Our biggest problem is the people who need help and refuse to admit it. If I could, I'd invite them to just be traumatized. Ted Cruz, my friend, you have suffered. Tucker Carlson, I believe you are as confused and angry as you look. Marjorie Taylor Greene, have a seat, here's some mushrooms. (Just a thought.)

Hook shooting. Between 2019 and 2021, 7.5 million people became first-time firearm owners, and 5.4 million of those had until then lived in homes without guns.

But to understand how our extended trauma has changed gun ownership, remember that our injuries go back beyond the pandemic. In 2015, aka the last good year, just 8 percent of new gun owners were Black; 75 percent were white and 65 percent men. With Trump's election, the demographic that had been eager to purchase guns under Obama—white people and men—slowed their roll, a time gun sellers called the "Trump Slump" (a phrase I want to use all the time now). Black people and women became new gun owners in higher proportion. Pre- and post-pandemic, the proportions remained roughly the same: about half women, and only 55 percent white.

Then the Floyd protests kicked off a reckoning. Then Joe Biden won. White men (as you'd expect) saw these as new reasons to arm themselves. And nonwhite, non-male people? They didn't see any reason to be less threatened than they were before.

Gun ownership isn't an entirely irrational response to the violence that lurks around the edges of our lives, especially those of women and minorities. The presence of firearms in a home makes the occupants more and not less likely to be the victims of gun violence, but I doubt the new owners are reading research papers on the topic.

No statistic can calm a nervous system beset by repeated alarms, and our primary coping mechanism just makes us seek out more coverage of what we're scared of, confirmation bias at its most intensely toxic. So when cell phones document once-obscure conflicts—whether that's police violence or road rage or assaults on passenger planes (the last two up statistically, in addition to stirring up social media frenzies)—the tragic results are at the top of our feeds. The attacks take place in more public spaces as well as in front of an individual's camera lens. Following Covid, there have been increases in violence against hospital workers, retail employees, and civil servants. Some of those attacks were spun out of denial about our shared trauma (vengeful "plandemic" adherents, maybe), others from purely individual anguish. Every single one of them makes us feel less secure.

The most vivid example of how tightly we cling to the illusion of safety lies at the top of our presumed presidential ballot and in the palsied hands of our gerontocratic Congress. Would a well-adjusted country keep these same people in charge for this long?

We are braced for the worst, and through our actions and inactions we sometimes inflict it ourselves.

(If we could translate just a small percentage of our urgent flight from danger to doing something about climate change, would it all be worth it? Discuss.)

Distracted and Disassociated

WE HAVE ALSO withdrawn into ourselves, or screens, or the rearview mirror. Even our irrational alarm about the future is, by definition, a refusal to actually engage with it.

The surveys that chart our hopelessness also show that we've reevaluated our pre-trauma past (those of us who can speak of such a thing). Almost 60 percent of the country agrees that "life for people like them is worse today than it was 50 years ago." Was 1973 that great? Or is it the low bar that makes this assertion so depressing?

Many of you are probably reading this on a screen, so I don't need to rehearse exactly what that's done to you or how often you engage with it and not the world around you. Children now spend over twice as much time on screens as before the pandemic; by last count in 2019, reading for pleasure was declining and screen use was up. No wonder there's not enough ADHD medication.

Compared to the Obama years, we are drinking more and on social media more. We've been spending more time alone each year since 2003, and between 2014 and 2021, our average time alone jumped by eight hours to a staggering 48 hours per week.

We see our friends less: The percentage of free time spent with individuals of other households, as the Bureau of Labor Statistics measures it, has gone from six and a half hours a week to just two hours and 45 minutes. We sense this apartness. In 2021, 58 percent of Americans told pollsters they felt lonely. We are so lonely the surgeon general has declared it an epidemic. The last couple of years saw new record highs in suicides and fatal drug overdoses. Our country is avoiding itself.

THE CURE

WE'VE AGREED THAT the patient is wounded; what do we prescribe? All individual trauma therapies, whatever the modality, have one goal: to change the story you tell yourself. To go from victim to survivor, from being ashamed to seeing responsibility clearly. If we want to change the future, we must change how we talk about the past. In individual therapy, that can mean re-experiencing the trauma, but from a different perspective; it can mean changing the brain chemistry so that new neural pathways

The stories we tell ourselves about what protects us are only stories, enormously powerful stories that do offer partial protection as they inflict harm on others. These stories create the illusion of security via separation. Privilege may keep you from certain kinds of risks, but it won't make you resilient. Only community can.

can form. It can mean somatic therapy in which the body releases more truth about what it's been through.

State actions can change national narratives through making their stories more true, more complete. In Germany, acknowledging and tending to the memory of the Holocaust is threaded through policy, from laws regulating public speech to a network of museums and monuments, to ongoing reparations (Jews will receive $1.4 billion next year). The story is imprinted into everyday life: There are tens of thousands of "stumbling stones" bearing the names of victims and survivors embedded in sidewalks. Healing is ongoing, so we still don't know exactly what trajectory Germany will follow, but consider what the country would be like if those things hadn't been done.

Researchers debate the "success" of truth and reconciliation commissions from South Africa to Canada; they are imperfect instruments. At present, they're useless to us anyway. We're missing the first half of the tool. Can we agree that any country that has enough public support to get a truth and reconciliation commission going is ahead of us?

I believe that we won't completely heal until we've fixed the structural flaws of capitalism. I would love to live in a world where capitalists cared about proving me wrong—a world in which "but what about your trauma?" made as much sense on a political debate stage as a question about the economy or education. But capitalism demands we remain traumatized; if we don't feel some level of pain and emptiness, we'll stop buying things we don't need.

What are some other actionable steps toward healing? I've heard at least one activist make the argument that the psychedelic therapy that's shown such promise for individual PTSD could work for large groups in conflict as well. "Ketamine as violence-prevention policy," she said. As amused as I am by the thought of a country-wide K-hole, the more practical approach is the most traditional by therapy standards: Talk about it. Get on the same page. Testify.

In other words, the easiest thing we could do might be the most important: just admit that we have all been through the same thing. The problem of having such a widespread injury points us in the direction of the solution, because to agree that we share a story would be the first step to retelling it.

Healing for Whom?

WHATEVER WE DO about our trauma, we have to be careful that our treatments don't reinscribe the same divisions over and over. Our methods of post-traumatic healing have to be as wide-reaching as the injuries themselves.

We are a country born out of the idea of abundance with a scarcity mindset. Few benefits—or rights—are genuinely available to everyone. Even limits to the franchise—once expanded, now contracting—are met with collective shrugs. Whole political movements have been born out of making sure that some people don't get what everyone else does (the vote, health care, freedom, a restroom that matches who they think they are). The only thing the right wing seems determined to put in everyone's arms is a weapon. And whatever healing after our national trauma means, it sounds expensive. Surely people's trauma can be triaged.

If only hierarchies of injury didn't just create new opportunities to inflict pain. Some classes of people will be at the bottom—their traumas "not as bad" as others'—and our history shows that it's the same classes of people at the bottom every time.

Total access has to be the goal. Otherwise, we will stop short when things get hard and keep remaking the structure that brought us to where we are. My hope for unlimited trauma resources is boundless, but my hope for the complete eradication of our equally large measure of racism *before* we do that is, well, not.

The biggest hurdle to our national healing isn't even the number of people who need help but don't get it. Our biggest problem is the people who need help and refuse to admit it. They don't want to be part of the story.

Some of them are the people who made panicked phone calls from the Capitol on January 6. How do we make them part of the story when they won't even say the words?

If I could, I'd invite them to just be traumatized. Ted Cruz, my friend, you have suffered. Tucker Carlson, I believe you are as confused and angry as you look. Marjorie Taylor Greene, have a seat, here's some mushrooms. (Just a thought.)

To extend a place in our group therapy circle to those who have materially benefited from the upheaval in all our lives does not have to minimize the anguish of anyone else. Bessel van der Kolk is not wrong to distinguish between the relative comfort of the privileged and the deepening circumstances of the non-privileged. Middle-class white people's new struggles are not *oppression*. But preemptively deciding that their pain doesn't count is one reason we are where we are now.

And the upside of daring to include the disgruntled naysayers is vast. Validating the trauma of people who only vaguely recognize their own experience can open up the conversation among all of us. Emphasizing the shared experience lays the groundwork for carefully and honestly acknowledging the differences. We might even talk about the systemic reasons why

privileged people's experience of trauma feels so special and new to them.

My hope is that then we would smash the system that separated us in the first place, because capitalism usually finds a way to undo any progress people make toward wholeness … but my ability to imagine positive outcomes has already been stretched to its limit, and I realize even the invitation to connect is asking too much.

Cruz, Carlson, and the indefatigable MTG et alia don't want to be included. They'll refuse our invitation. They will do more than refuse it. They will raise money off of it as it dominates news cycles. This outsize response would then (as the research shows) quite possibly retraumatize everyone, including them. We know how it would play out, because we've already seen how the right frames almost any plea for kindness and grace: Fuckin' snowflakes, amiright? Defensiveness at that amplitude is a trauma response, obviously. So I've heard in countless 12-step meetings: "You spot it, you got it." I'm not sure how we shake them loose from the illusion that they are, in fact, delicate snowflakes, too.

If the destruction visited on us these past few years has shown us anything, it's that privilege never protects anyone completely from the grip of the system: Being white won't save white people from capitalism; patriarchy won't save men from sexual assault; supporting Trump won't save you from a rampaging mob of Trump supporters.

Privilege does allow people to ignore the downstream effects of their trauma; privilege demands it. The Congress members who have disavowed the fear they clearly felt on January 6 (there are recordings of them displaying it!) have done so because the fear of losing power now frightens them more than the fear of losing their lives did then. You do not, under any circumstances, have to hand it to Mike Pence for anything, but my heart does ache a tiny bit over how he's been made an example of. He has refused to deny the extremity of being shuttled around the Capitol by the Secret Service because the president suggested a lynching, and that threatens the delusion that a red hat protects you from getting your head bashed in. He's not sticking to the story.

The stories we tell ourselves about what protects us—whiteness, ableism, gender binaries, heteronormativity, and class—are *only* stories, enormously powerful stories that do offer partial protection as they inflict harm on others. These categories don't keep people safe; they exist so that some can think of themselves as *more safe than other people*. These stories create the illusion of security via separation. Privilege may keep you from certain kinds of risks, but it won't make you resilient. Only community can.

Inviting grace for the people who have done terrible things is another change to the narrative. It might be the most revolutionary one.

Maladaptive trauma responses are difficult to undo because they feel as if they work, sort of. A gun won't make you more safe, but it might make you *feel* more safe. Drinking and drugs don't make you less lonely, but you don't care as much about it.

We are not wrong to worry about the future, if only because we are dealing with our experience in such destructive ways. But the opposite of feeling afraid about the future isn't certainty about one's safety. The opposite of feeling afraid is confidence that you will get through the thing you're afraid of. Recovering from trauma isn't about preventing the possibility of ever being hurt again. It's about coming to accept that you were hurt and that you can heal … and do it again if necessary.

Studies of torture survivors have found that activists "emerge as less traumatized than nonactivists, even though activists often experience more torture." Specifically, those "having no commitment to a cause or activist group or prior expectations of arrest or torture" reported higher levels of distress. What's more, among activists who were tortured, those with a strong commitment to their cause were the least likely to have symptoms of PTSD.

No one can say exactly what cushions activists but doesn't protect everyone. Maybe activists saw their suffering as part of a larger story? First, they knew what they were doing risked retribution; second, they believed it was worth it; third, the goal that made the risk worthwhile was a shared one. They weren't taking the risk alone or just for their own sakes; their resilience was rooted in not being alone.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor whose experiences led him to focus on our search for life's meaning, might argue that activists' connections to a larger group and greater goals created meaning; perhaps understanding yourself as part of a community establishes a sense of meaning before anything bad ever happens.

Mending, bringing together, reconnecting. We have to remember that the wound we're healing either already existed or had created an area so fragile it would shatter at the lightest touch. Being in a community feels like an improvement on human relations in general. But maybe it's how we were always supposed to be. TNR

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WHEN DO "NEVER TRUMP REPUBLICANS" BECOME DEMOCRATS FOR LIFE?

Call them Biden Republicans.

Call them whatever you want.

Pollsters, politicians, and analysts from both parties say it may just be a matter of time.

By Ben Jacobs

Illustration by Doug Chayka


DETOUR
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A DECADE AGO, KRISTEN DADDOW-RODRIGUEZ WAS A LOYAL Republican. Raised in Michigan, she voted automatically for the GOP in each election, even though she wasn't wild about every candidate offered up by her party. She considered herself a fiscal conservative and social liberal who happily backed John McCain and Mitt Romney. Now, she is a dedicated Democratic activist in suburban Atlanta.

Daddow-Rodriguez is not exactly an outlier in American politics, although it may sometimes seem that way in this hyperpolarized era. After the 2016 election, there was a vogue in the media to understand how Donald Trump had possibly managed to win the presidency despite scandal after scandal. He received almost three million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton—an early sign of the limits of his electoral might—but because most pollsters and experts had predicted a Clinton win, there was a desperate scramble across the Rust Belt to find the once Democratic voters who had cast a ballot for the Republican. Blue-collar diners from Allentown to Youngstown were swarmed with reporters determined to discern the secret of Donald Trump's appeal.

In hindsight, that phenomenon may be eclipsed by another one: Republicans deserting their party precisely because of Trump, forming a demographic now familiarly known as "Never Trump Republicans." Whether it was his xenophobic remarks about immigrants, his crude personal behavior, or his general disdain for the norms of American politics, many white, college-educated voters—long a bedrock of the GOP—cast their ballot either for Hillary Clinton or for a third-party candidate to avoid supporting Trump. The shock of his election kept this initially from being a broad focus in popular culture, but in special election after special election in the coming year, culminating in the 2018 midterms, it was clear there was a lasting revulsion from these Republicans toward the Trump-era GOP. This was reinforced in 2020, when these voters appear to have turned even more heavily against Trump, helping Joe Biden run the table in the most competitive swing states.

This tranche of voters is not huge, but they may be decisive—in 2020, 16 percent of self-identified moderate or liberal Republicans voted for Biden, according to an analysis by Pew, twice the share that did so in 2016. This even as Biden won a narrow electoral college victory by a combined margin of just under 43,000 votes in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin. Bryon Allen, a longtime Republican pollster and partner at WPA Intelligence, noted that, before Trump, Republicans in many suburban counties would get narrow majorities. "Now, without a [GOP Georgia Governor Brian] Kemp or a [GOP Virginia Governor Glenn] Youngkin or somebody who has particular appeal and the right issues … we might get 47 percent or 48 percent" in the same areas.

In 2022, some of these voters swung back toward the GOP, but not all, as Republican hopes of a red wave fizzled out in most of the country. In 2024, the most likely scenario is that Donald Trump will be on the ballot yet again as the first person since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to serve as a major party nominee in three consecutive presidential elections. Even if Trump falls short, the top two candidates beneath him in national polls as of this summer, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and businessman Vivek Ramaswamy, have actively tried to claim his mantle within the party.

"I think Donald Trump was the gateway drug that has drawn a lot of otherwise pretty standard Republicans to the Democratic Party over the last eight or nine years," Zac McCrary, a veteran Democratic pollster, told *The New Republic*. "And a Never Trump Republican in 2016, two or three cycles later, turns into a pretty conventional Democrat up and down the ballot."

That may be somewhat wishful thinking; ancestral loyalties can be hard to shake. The American South is dotted with jurisdictions that stopped voting for Democrats at the federal level a half-century ago yet continued to elect Democratic legislators and local officials into the past decade. Further, the Republican Party is still deeply at war within itself. And while Donald Trump and his ideological allies may be ascendant, there is no final verdict about the role of Trump and Trumpism within the GOP.

While that civil war rages, a faction of erstwhile Republicans has opted out of the fight and simply decided to back Democrats. With many of these well-educated suburbanites poised to vote for Joe Biden again in 2024, the question isn't just whether they will swing what is likely to be yet another tight election next year, but whether they are part of the Democratic coalition moving forward. Conversations with pollsters and operatives from both parties suggest that, after a third straight election in which Trump is the leader of the GOP, Republicans may find that they

PREVIOUS SPREAD: GETTY; ISTOCKPHOTO (X5)

have alienated these voters forever, while creating plenty of new Democrats along the way.

With a Hispanic husband, Daddow-Rodriguez felt uncomfortable about Trump's rise in light of his rhetoric on immigration. She didn't vote for him in 2016, but didn't vote for Clinton either, instead casting a ballot for Libertarian Gary Johnson before completely moving into the Democratic fold starting around 2017. And, if anything, she has become more steadfastly Democratic since Trump left office, because of the GOP's opposition to abortion—and the Supreme Court decision by conservative justices that overturned the right to obtain one.

"The day that the abortion ban went into effect in Georgia, I became six weeks pregnant with a high-risk pregnancy," Daddow-Rodriguez recalled. "I never, ever thought my medical choices were going to be restricted.... But when your own doctor asks you, if things go south, do you have the resources to go somewhere where you can get medical care? Yeah, that was enough for me. I will never vote for a Republican ever again."

TRUMP'S ABILITY TO alienate Republicans has long been palpable at the elite level. There is a seemingly endless roster of former professional GOPers who have become staples on cable news since 2016. For much of the 2020 campaign, the turncoat Republican consultants of the anti-Trump group the Lincoln Project were inescapable, as they flogged viral campaign ads (which often seemed to serve mostly to titillate loyal Democrats). Meanwhile, before and after the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, laundry lists of former Republican elected officials who found Trump antithetical to their values provided a steady diet of fodder for Democratic press releases.

A number of these figures are now essentially Democrats. In 2021, longtime Republican and erstwhile Clinton nemesis Bill Kristol endorsed and actively campaigned for Terry McAuliffe, the über Clinton loyalist, during his unsuccessful Virginia gubernatorial bid. In 2022, Evan McMullin, who ran a quixotic third-party presidential campaign in 2016 to provide an alternative for Never Trumpers, was the de facto Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in Utah. Those who haven't entirely renounced the GOP, like former Illinois Representative Adam Kinzinger and former Pennsylvania Representative Charlie Dent, have nonetheless become cable news fixtures who speak progressives' language.

The far less explored phenomenon is the movement of the rank-and-file Never Trumpers. Operatives and analysts on both sides of the aisle agree that the key factor driving the suburban trend toward Democrats in the last decade is education polarization. College-educated white voters have become much more likely to vote Democrat, and noncollege white voters have become much more inclined to vote Republican. This had been percolating long before Trump emerged onto the scene, but it sped up dramatically once he came down that golden escalator in 2015. At the same time, the composition of the larger electorate is constantly changing as well: An increasingly large portion of voters are college-educated—41 percent in 2020, compared to only 5 percent in 1952. This surge has continued as what was once a reliable GOP constituency has been shifting more heavily toward Democrats: 54 percent of white college graduates voted for Mitt Romney in 2012, but, by 2020, only 46 percent voted for Trump, according to numbers from Democratic data firm Catalist. Jonathan Robinson, the firm's director of research, used an analogy from geology. Continents are always drifting in different directions, but sometimes a volcano explodes and accelerates what would otherwise be a slow, inexorable process.

The shifts seen in the Trump era in individual states and counties have long been in motion. Only a few decades ago, West Virginia was a safe Democratic bastion, as blue-collar whites consistently voted for the party up and down the ballot, while the prosperous suburbs of Philadelphia were steadfastly Republican. Both flipped well before 2016. However, the past decade has seen this once gradual process accelerate at warp speed, as highly educated jurisdictions like Montgomery County in suburban Philadelphia have gone from places Democrats win to places where they win by landslides.

PERHAPS THE TERRAIN where this transition has been most stark is in the northern suburbs of Atlanta. Ringing the upper half of the Perimeter, the beltway that encircles the city, the region sits like an eyebrow growing steadily thicker every year as sprawl turns farmland into exurbs and exurbs into suburbs. It spans what was once the heartland of the Georgia Republican Party and now serves as the center of a booming regional economy. The prosperity is almost as thick as the humid summer heat. For every Waffle House, there is a shiny new Starbucks, and the highways are choked with fresh construction. In front of a bright suburban library, a yard sign reads COMMUNITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN POLITICS, only feet from a rusty historical marker detailing Civil War troop movements at the site.

Metro Atlanta is packed with transplants from all over the country and the world. At a Dunkin Donuts in a strip mall in the prosperous suburb of Alpharetta that also features an Indian vegetarian restaurant and a Korean barbecue joint, the state's former Republican lieutenant governor, Geoff Duncan, told *TNR* that the Atlanta-area eyebrow is the region that "determines every election" in the Peach State. It was the first place where the Republican backlash to Trump fully hit the national consciousness. GOP Representative Tom Price had won his district six times with more than 60 percent of the vote. But in 2017, he was appointed to Trump's Cabinet, and a special election held to fill his seat resulted in only a slim Republican victory. The race—which ended in a narrow loss by Democrat Jon Ossoff, a previously unknown 30-year-old—featured a deluge of media coverage and tens of millions in outside spending.

Since then, this area has emerged as a bona fide political battleground. In 2018, Democrats won the seat Ossoff lost and only narrowly lost an adjacent House seat by 419 votes. In 2020, they picked up that seat, too, and the region was crucial not just to Joe Biden's presidential victory but to the balance of power in the U.S. Senate, when wins by Ossoff and Raphael Warnock determined control of the chamber.

Then, in 2022, something changed. Incumbent Governor Brian Kemp managed to win over some of these voters, as every Republican running for state office went on to victory in what was a disappointing midterm election nationally for the GOP. Even so, at the federal level, Warnock further improved on past Democratic performance and beat Herschel Walker, the scandal-ridden and gaffe-prone Republican nominee, to secure a full term in the Senate.

> **"... when your own doctor asks you, if things go south, do you have the resources to go somewhere where you can get medical care? Yeah, that was enough for me. I will never vote for a Republican ever again."**
>
> **—Kristen Daddow-Rodriguez**

For Duncan, there is a clear lesson here, and it's not purely one of demographic change. "As far as Republicans and moderates are concerned, I think it's that Republicans don't like crazy," he said. In Duncan's view, running Trump and candidates like Trump gave voters "an excuse to leave the Republican Party. It's just really easy to explain to the watercooler. 'Hey, I can't'—I mean, I hear this all day, every day—'Hey, I can't vote Republican until this party purges itself of hateful people like Donald Trump.'" But, he noted, these voters are "paying attention, because that suburban mom in Cobb County [near Atlanta] voted for Brian Kemp. Right? They're articulate enough to understand who they're voting for." Still, he warned, time is running out for the GOP to win back these voters. "If we let this nonsense and Donald Trump go on too long, we'll probably lose that voter for a lifetime," he said.

The trends are clear, driven by a mix of voters changing parties and in-migration by transplants to the area. In Cobb County, Romney won with 55.5 percent of the vote in 2012, but Biden won with 56.3 percent in 2020, with the Democratic presidential vote total jumping by nearly 90,000, while the Republican vote fell by more than 6,000. A similar phenomenon has played out in Gwinnett, another suburban Atlanta county, where Democrats made even more dramatic gains. Romney won with 54 percent in 2012, and Biden won with 58.4 percent in 2020; Trump received fewer than 7,000 more votes than Romney had, while some 110,000 more votes were cast for Biden than for Barack Obama in 2012. In contrast, Brian Kemp did better in both counties in 2022 than he did four years before in his rematch against Stacey Abrams.

The shift away from the GOP in this area "happened probably more quickly than I anticipated," said a former officeholder who was granted anonymity to speak frankly about the region's politics. "But for the time being, I think that the sentiment remains very strong—not that people are strongly supporting Biden, but they certainly are strongly un-supporting the former president."

If the picture is a nuanced one, however, it's clear that some former Republicans have quickly become ardent Democrats.

ANGIE JONES GREW UP in a Republican family in east Tennessee, just a couple of hours north of Atlanta, and it wasn't a casual attachment. Her father, a lawyer, worked on Senator Howard Baker's campaigns, and as a result she spent part of her adolescence as a Senate page in the Capitol. Her youthful experience with the legislative process left her somewhat cynical about politics. Still, she voted Republican reliably, a habit she kept up after moving to Atlanta for college, getting married, having two daughters, and settling down in the prosperous suburb of Johns Creek. But the lifelong churchgoer eventually started questioning her worldview. The son of a family friend who also attended their church came out as gay, and it sparked an awful backlash from other church members. "That became a kind of watershed moment in my life," she said.

"In the beginning, I blamed politics that infected the church for causing these otherwise good, decent people—and they are otherwise good, decent people. They're not monsters. But they behaved like monsters towards the family," she said. "And it's easier for me to blame the politics that infected the church than to blame the religious belief that had infected the politics at that time. By the time Donald Trump came along, I'm not sure if the tail is wagging the dog or the dog is wagging the tail," she added.

Jones was speaking to *TNR* at a Whole Foods in Sandy Springs, a suburb that was only incorporated as a city in 2005, when the wealthy, majority-white area effectively separated itself from Fulton County, the jurisdiction that includes Atlanta. Since then, it has grown far more diverse and far more progressive. A Romney voter in 2012, Jones cast her ballot for independent McMullin in 2016. She felt he was a decent man, and she was skeptical of Hillary Clinton's chances to win Georgia. Her full-scale immersion in progressive politics didn't begin until the next year, during the special election for Congress. "I went into one of [Ossoff's] field offices and said, 'I'm here to volunteer. I've never done anything on a political campaign. I have no idea what to do. But I felt like I needed to do something. And this is something I can do.'" (Daddow-Rodriguez lives in Sandy Springs herself, and likewise voted for Ossoff in 2017.)

Jones has never stopped campaigning for Democrats at every level since then. She has tended to think she's basically a centrist, but noted that the Republicans with whom she still talks politics find her "pretty liberal." When pressed about her views, she said, "I don't think it's overly progressive to say that children shouldn't get shot in math class, but apparently that's a progressive ideology. I don't think it's progressive to say that forced pregnancy is a human rights violation, but that seems to be pretty progressive, pretty liberal." When prodded, she only took issue with one left-wing idea: She thought it was a bit much for a couple of her friends to favor confiscating all civilian-owned firearms. That, in her opinion, is "wacky."

In a home where Fox News was once on frequently, she now watches MSNBC much more often, as it features many voices

who she feels reflect her political journey, like Nicolle Wallace, a former Republican strategist, and Joe Scarborough, the former Republican congressman. Looking back at her past politics, she noted, "One of my biggest regrets to this day is I never voted for Barack Obama. That will go down in my own personal history as one of my biggest regrets."

NOT ALL POLITICAL JOURNEYS are as clear-cut as Daddow-Rodriguez's or Jones's, and most voters who once cast their ballots for Mitt Romney have not been fully transformed into MSNBC-watching progressive activists. In fact, Carolyn Bourdeaux, who served one term in Congress as a Democrat in the Atlanta suburbs from 2021 to 2023 before losing a primary after redistricting, told *TNR* many Never Trump Republicans are still up for grabs.

According to Bourdeaux, voters in the region tend to be "pro-opportunity, very pro-business. And not super, super socially liberal.... But they are not Trumpist and nativist either. And that is a really hard break point for them."

From her perspective, these voters "were waiting for the Republican Party to become normal again, and they shifted hard back to Kemp and [Georgia Secretary of State Brad] Raffensperger in the 2022 cycle.... Not all of them were a faithful constituency that the Democrats can rely on. They have not rolled into the Democratic Party base, yet. They were there to be wooed."

The former member of Congress argued, "Democrats would be well-advised to think very carefully about where they are standing on issues and whether they are able to appeal to that constituency.... I think they should be leaning hard on [the fact] that we are pro-business, and a sane alternative to the Republicans, because these folks are really pocketbook voters in a way that is very acute."

Lisa Winton and Emory Morsberger are, in their own ways, two such voters. Both are former constituents of Bourdeaux who voted for Trump in 2016, Biden in 2020, and Warnock and Kemp in 2022. Morsberger, a real estate developer who served in the Georgia state House as a Republican in the 1990s, moved down to Atlanta for college from his native Baltimore, deciding Georgia was where he wanted to make his future. He spoke to *TNR* while driving back from an event to promote the state's film industry. Although movie productions have flocked to the Peach State in recent years and helped supercharge metro Atlanta's economy, some Republicans want to cut tax credits that have lured them. As Morsberger tells it, "There is a group in the state legislature of far-right Republicans who feel like we don't need to attract any more Democrats to Georgia, because most film people are Democrats." In his view, "that's really cutting off your nose to spite your face, because it's been a huge economic benefit to a lot of communities throughout Georgia." When asked to describe his own politics, Morsberger said, "I wouldn't say I'm a Democrat. But I would say I'm a Biden, Warnock Republican. OK. I'm not going to vote for people who are nuts or people who are ethically challenged."

Morsberger offered his own larger analysis of why voters like him were backing away from the GOP. "Trump has basically caused a lot of Republicans to not [call] themselves Republicans. They're still fiscal conservatives ... with a moral compass. But they're not going to go along with Trump." He said he backed Democrats in the 2020 Senate race as well, for one simple reason: Incumbents David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler supported Trump. "Both of them were spouting the stolen election stuff," he said. "That really stopped me. To me, that's treasonous."

Before Trump, Morsberger had almost exclusively voted Republican, and even during the 2022 primaries, he actively boosted one of Herschel Walker's opponents in hopes of the GOP nominating an acceptable candidate. Morsberger said the candidate warned then, "If Herschel is [the nominee], we're gonna have Raphael Warnock as the senator. And sure enough, Herschel was nominated, and we got Raphael Warnock." Looking back at how Trump's anointment of Walker virtually guaranteed that the former Georgia running back would be the Republican nominee, Mosberger marveled: "That was mind-boggling that that all evolved the way it did. It just was a travesty."

Faced with the choice between Trump and Biden again, he'd choose Biden. But given other options, he'd enthusiastically campaign for Democratic West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin (if he ran as an independent) or South Carolina Senator Tim Scott (if he became the GOP nominee).

In contrast, Lisa Winton is still a traditional swing voter. The owner of a manufacturing company that makes the machines used to fabricate copper tubes and semirigid coax cable—which are used in products ranging from light fixtures to the Iron Dome defense system in Israel—Winton describes herself as fiscally conservative and socially liberal. She praised Trump's policies for American manufacturers like herself, but said she eventually got tired of everything else happening in politics while he was in office. "The news cycle, it just wears you out," she said.

She didn't just swing back and forth for president, but up and down the ticket. Although she happily voted for Brian Kemp for reelection in 2022, she had actually voted for Stacey Abrams four years before. She doesn't know who she would vote for if faced yet again with the choice between Trump and Biden next year, even as she mourned that supporting a third-party candidate would be a wasted vote. "If I had to vote tomorrow, I have no idea which way I would go. No idea."

THE CHALLENGE FOR both parties is to determine what percentage of all the Republicans who voted for Biden in 2020 resemble Daddow-Rodriguez and Jones, which are more like Morsberger, and which might behave like Winton. For all the debate over broad demographic trends and shifts in the electorate, sometimes a swing voter is just a swing voter.

Robinson noted that Catalist's data showed that, while 46 percent of white, college-educated voters supported Barack Obama in 2012, 54 percent cast their ballot for Joe Biden in 2020. However, that dropped back in 2022, when 50 percent of white, college-educated voters supported Democratic candidates for the House in the midterms. But that data comes with a caveat. Robinson found that candidates who were election deniers received "a MAGA penalty" in top-of-the-ticket races of up to 4 percent. Thus the divide in Georgia, where Kemp, a party-line conservative save for his objections to Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election, ran ahead of Herschel Walker. This was echoed by Allen, the Republican pollster, who said a clear lesson of the 2022 midterms was that the Republicans "who were the most emulative of Trump ... definitely had a significant challenge." He thought Republican losses among these voters would not be "a permanent problem for a different nominee with a message that would work." As

Sarah Longwell, a longtime Republican operative who has since become a vocal Never Trumper herself, pointed out, these voters "wanted to vote for Republicans; they just didn't want to vote for the Republicans that were on offer" in states like Pennsylvania, Arizona, and, in Herschel Walker's case, Georgia.

One confounding variable with these voters in 2022 was the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Dobbs* to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The ruling was projected in the immediate aftermath to drive a huge number of pro-choice female voters to the polls and accelerate the exodus of white, college-educated women from the GOP. However, Robinson said that its impact was most felt for Democrats among noncollege-educated white women, and that it had less of an effect among the voters who had already shifted in 2020. Longwell, for her part, emphasized that it mattered more for some candidates than others: "It was actually a much more holistic problem where, between abortion and election denialism, it painted a picture of a candidate that the voters just thought [was] too extreme."

It's unlikely that Republican candidates will moderate their views on these issues any time soon. In 2023, 76 percent of Republicans identify as pro-life, according to a Gallup poll, a record number. Polling shows that self-identified Republicans have become increasingly comfortable with the January 6 attack on the Capitol, and a steady majority have long believed, incorrectly, that Joe Biden only won because of voter fraud, even as Trump faces federal criminal charges over efforts to overturn the 2020 election. The party is also increasingly isolationist: A clear majority of Republican voters willing to vote for Trump oppose aid to Ukraine, according to a July *New York Times*/Siena poll, while nearly 70 percent of those Republicans who are unwilling to back the former president support aid. There is a similar divide on other long-standing fissures within the GOP, as Trump voters oppose same-sex marriage and comprehensive immigration reform, while those opposed to the former president support both.

As existential as the divide may be between erstwhile Republicans and the party's new MAGA base, Bourdeaux fears Democrats are complacent about 2024. "I'm worried a lot of the Democrats really need to dig deep to understand why the economy is pretty good and yet why Biden is still so unpopular, and really take an honest, cold, hard look at what is driving that," she said.

Of course, that becomes less of an issue if Trump is the nominee and voters simply face the same stark choice they did four years before.

THE ENDURANCE OF Never Trump Republicans means that a not insignificant number of George W. Bush and Mitt Romney voters, from pundits on down to suburban parents, are now part of the Democratic base and participating in party primaries. One can even read Never Trump websites like The Bulwark and see articles urging the Democrats to restrain the most left-wing segment of their base, lest they alienate swing voters and empower the GOP. When asked where he was politically, Bill Kristol told *TNR*, "I'm pretty comfortable with the current Democratic Party. [Fellow Never Trumpers] are not comfortable with the current Republican Party. We don't think the hopes for its immediate reformation are very realistic. We are OK with Biden. We think, in fact, one thing we could do is strengthen the moderate Democratic Party."

Moderate is a relative term. To the extent they have been assimilated, Republicans who have flipped to the Democrats in the Trump era are not glaring outliers within their new party, like Joe Manchin or Krysten Sinema. Matt Bennett, the executive vice president of the moderate Democratic think tank Third Way, argued this influx had not "fundamentally changed the Democratic Party," noting, instead, that when Republicans "have decided to vote for Democrats, they prefer moderates." In Bennett's view, most of the Democratic electorate has shared those preferences, as shown by Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential primary. "I am not convinced that they're gonna be yanking the party to the right, because I think that they are fairly comfortable with that kind of Biden-level ideology," he said. "And that's where the center of the party is."

Perhaps the most prominent defector from the GOP in the past few years to run for office was Barbara Bollier, a moderate Republican state legislator from Kansas who switched parties in 2018 and became the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in the Jayhawk State in 2020. She had been contemplating the move for a while before Kansas elected Democrat Laura Kelly, whom she endorsed, as governor in 2018. In fact, Bollier said, she'd held off on formally making the change to maximize the political impact of her backing Kelly, finally taking the plunge "because it was untenable both at the national level and at the state level" for her stay within the GOP.

As a pro-choice woman, Bollier feels that being a Republican had never been a perfect fit. As she put it, "I lived with the Republican Party's … anti-abortion politics my whole life. And I was able just to move beyond, because to me, that should not be the only focus of government. In fact, government shouldn't be involved, other than to safely regulate all health care. So that wasn't enough of a driving factor. It was the other things, and particularly the whole movement towards fascism." In other words, she's not a right-winger, and has largely been at home in her new party.

Still, large-scale shifts from one major party to another tend to produce conflict, particularly among those who are older. Kristol, who has endured some criticism on the left in the course of his party change, recalled the neoconservatives of his parents' generation facing friction as they left the Democratic fold. "I think people forget, but it was still awkward. There was resentment against … older versions of me," he said. Kristol cited as an example the efforts by some Republicans in the early 1980s to block neoconservative Bill Bennett's appointment to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

But this conflict dies away in time, as people age and identities harden. There aren't many new Never Trumpers registering to vote as Republicans in 2023. If Trump becomes the nominee in 2024, the youngest voter who would have had the opportunity to cast a ballot for any other Republican presidential nominee will be 30. Many of the prominent Republicans who are symbolic of a different GOP—and refused to vote for Trump in 2016, like George H.W. Bush and John McCain—will have been long dead, and almost all who have remained active in Republican politics will have bent the knee in some form.

As Bollier reminisced about knocking on doors in the district she represented in suburban Kansas City, she emphasized that generational changing of the guard. "What was fascinating to me were households where the parents were Republicans many times and would claim they were moderates, and none of their children remained Republicans," she said. "It was so overwhelmingly obvious that the demise was coming. Northeast

The endurance of Never Trump Republicans means that a not insignificant number of George W. Bush and Mitt Romney voters, from pundits on down to suburban parents, are now part of the Democratic base and participating in party primaries.

Johnson County, which used to always be a moderate Republican bastion, is now all Democratic."

In fact, if there has been any major impact on internal party dynamics because of Never Trumpers switching, it is almost certainly within the GOP, where it has culled some comparatively moderate and more establishment-oriented voters. The number is not huge: According to Vanderbilt University political scientist John Sides's survey data from the Voter Study Group, a long-term research project of political trends, only around 5 percent of self-reported Romney voters said they voted for Clinton in 2016. Allen was skeptical that it would have a tremendous effect, but the conservative pollster suggested "the average Republican nominee in the average race will be slightly more populist than it would have been in 2012." The result would be "slightly more J.D. Vance–like nominees than Youngkin/Romney nominees," but it wouldn't be a drastic shift, he said. Still, Trump has radicalized those Republicans who have stuck it out in the party; Longwell noted that focus groups she's conducted indicate those who have remained within the GOP have identified as increasingly conservative and look askance at the Republican Party of the past. These voters "don't want to go back to the Bush years. They want the Make America Great Again iteration of the Republican Party, even if they have been Republicans for a long time," she said.

POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS ARE fragile, circumstantial things. They don't happen in sudden lightning bolts that strike every 30 years, but instead involve both the mixture of broad demographic and economic forces and very specific circumstances that produce presidential nominees in American politics. Although there is a school of political science that highlights a handful of presidential elections as marking sharp, long-term changes in party coalitions—including 1800, 1860, and 1932—Daniel Schlozman, a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, argues realignment is a constant process as the points of conflict between the two parties change. The movement of white voters in the South toward the Republican Party might have been accelerated if Jimmy Carter wasn't the Democratic nominee in 1976. Then again, without Carter as the nominee, the neoconservatives who broke away from the Democrats might have stayed in the fold.

Just like those realignments in the past, the emergence of Never Trumpers is the product of both long-term trends and candidate-specific quirks; the trend of educational polarization slowed or accelerated depending on which candidates were on the ballot. In 2012, the GOP nominated a candidate in Mitt Romney who overperformed among the college-educated white voters in the suburbs who have turned on Trump. Some of these voters would have likely started shifting toward Democrats earlier if, instead, the Republican nominee was Rick Santorum, whose 2014 book was titled *Blue Collar Conservatives*. With Trump, the long-term trends and the candidate-specific quirks collided.

But the difference with Trump is that his massive influence on American political coalitions is largely based on whether voters thrill to his transgressions or are appalled by his grotesqueries. Even now, it's sometimes difficult to discern whether it is his personality itself or the worldview that Trump embodies that has driven some Republicans out of the party. As Schlozman put it, if you "take a dozen people in Atlanta who voted for Mitt Romney, what they think of Donald Trump determines how they're voting now in a very important way," but "what explains their views about Donald Trump?"

What's clearer is that relatively few voters were swayed by his policy accomplishments, like a generic GOP tax cut bill or his administration's oversight of Operation Warp Speed (which Trump alternately celebrated or shied away from). Instead, it's the loaded rhetoric that he has brought to American politics on topics ranging from building a physical wall on the border with Mexico to his repeated false claims of election fraud. In contrast, past realignments have rested on far more robust legislative feats. The Democratic majorities of the Roosevelt era were founded on support for or opposition to the programs of the New Deal. The shift in the South starting in the 1960s was based on reaction to the landmark civil rights laws of the Johnson administration. With Trump, it's often simply been the man himself and the forces he has unleashed. The result has smoothed the transition of these former Republicans into the Democratic fold.

It's impossible to predict the next lasting fault line in American politics. As Schlozman noted, modern political parties rest on a layer of intersecting cleavages going back to the Civil War, and each new alignment leads to new coalitions and new points of contention. But if Trump remains the dominant figure on the GOP scene for yet another election cycle, the voters who fled the Republican Party aren't likely to return. And even if he does somehow fade into the background, those same voters may find the party they once called their own virtually unrecognizable. TNR

Ben Jacobs *is a reporter in Washington, D.C.*

The State of Book Banning in America

Book bans aren't new. But a concerted right-wing scheme to target books featuring people of color and LGBTQ+ characters has turned schools into censorship battlegrounds. **By Jasmine Liu**

CITIZENS HAVE LED fiery campaigns against books they deem objectionable since before America's founding. As early as the 1650s, Massachusetts Bay colonists banned and burned William Pynchon's pamphlet *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* because it allegedly failed to adhere to Calvinist beliefs. Book bans were common in the South in the run-up to the Civil War, and nationwide during the McCarthy era.

But in the last few years, something changed. More people began writing complaints and demonstrating at meetings. They grew far more vocal. And they started to rally around the same texts, slamming them as "pornographic" or for supposedly preaching "critical race theory." Since 2021, book banning—specifically, blocking access to them in schools and libraries—has become an organized movement, one backed by a powerful network of politicians, advocacy groups, and conservative donors.

More books are being challenged—for possible restriction or removal from libraries and curricula—than have been in decades. In the first half of the 2022–23 school year, PEN America, the free speech organization, tracked nearly 1,500 book bans nationwide, affecting 874 unique titles. Books centering on people of color and LGBTQ+ characters have been disproportionately targeted. In some GOP-controlled states, legislation has led to the widespread removal from schools of books with references to sex and sexuality, as well as race and racism.

The first week of October is the American Library Association's Banned Books Week, and to mark the occasion, *The New Republic* will launch a Bookmobile Tour to distribute texts conservatives have decided children simply should not read.

CENSORSHIP CHIEFS

Ron DeSantis

Under Governor DeSantis, Florida became the first of many red states to enact laws making it easier for parents to challenge books in school libraries that they believe are pornographic, deal improperly with race, or can otherwise be considered inappropriate. He was applauded by a Moms for Liberty (see below) founder for "blazing a trail" on school book bans.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders

Governor Huckabee Sanders signed a law imposing criminal penalties on Arkansas librarians who knowingly provide "harmful" materials to minors—though a federal judge has temporarily blocked sections of the law, calling them too vague. In January, Sanders also signed an executive order to prohibit "indoctrination" and "critical race theory" in schools.

Greg Abbott

The Texas governor signed a law banning sexually explicit books from schools. The law requires vendors to rate books as "sexually relevant" or "sexually explicit" to determine if they require parental approval or full removal. During the 2021–22 school year, Texas districts banned more books than those in any other state.

Moms for Liberty

Founded in 2021, Moms for Liberty has rapidly expanded into a national organization with almost 300 chapters. Its strategy is to take over school boards and label dissenting teachers, librarians, and parents "groomers." The organization has also endorsed legislation in line with its goals like "Don't Say Gay," the notorious Florida law hamstringing discussions of sexuality in many classrooms. The Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled Moms for Liberty an extremist group.

READING REBELS

Suzette Baker

In March 2022, Baker was fired as head librarian of the Kingsland Branch Library in Llano County, Texas, for "insubordination" and "failure to follow instructions," which she said included her refusal to take down a display of banned books. Among the titles that have attracted the ire of local officials: *Between the World and Me*, the Ta-Nehisi Coates book that was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize.

Debbie Chavez

Chavez quit her school librarian job in Round Rock, Texas, after a parent met with her to discuss *Lawn Boy*—a novel that includes a romance between two boys—and secretly recorded the conversation, sharing excerpts on Facebook. Critics claimed she was "grooming" kids and called for her firing. "It was so horrific to see that my words were being used as a rallying cry for the book censors," she told *The New York Times*.

Summer Boismier

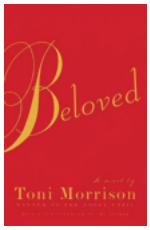
Boismier, an English teacher at Norman High School in Oklahoma, shared with her students a QR code to Books UnBanned, a program of New York's Brooklyn Public Library that offers access to books that have been banned or challenged. She received a torrent of abuse and later resigned, claiming there was no way for her to do her job amid passage of a new law limiting instruction related to race and gender.

Anonymous Utah parent

In a protest of legislation making it easier to remove "pornographic or indecent" content, a Utah parent filed a complaint with an eight-page list of objectionable passages from the Bible—successfully forcing a district to remove the text from elementary and middle schools. The decision was quickly reversed.

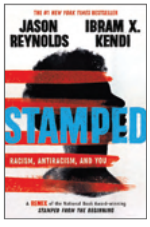
50 MOST BANNED BOOKS

A Lake Travis, Texas, parent got a book purged from her school's library after Googling "cornhole," a word that appears in *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez, explaining at a school board meeting what she'd learned: "cornhole is a sexual slang vulgarism" and "means to have anal sex."



A Fairfax County, Virginia, parent tried and failed to get Toni Morrison's *Beloved* banned for allegedly being rife with explicit material. Still, the aggrieved citizen went on to star in a Glenn Youngkin campaign ad as he successfully ran for governor in 2021.

Seven white school board members voted unanimously in Pickens County, South Carolina, to remove *Stamped* from libraries and classrooms. It traces the history of racism in the United States, but parents complained that it "promote[s] socialism" and "demonstrates radical Marxism infecting our schools and our culture."



Books are listed in descending order by frequency of bans in schools nationwide.

Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe
All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson
Out of Darkness by Ashley Hope Pérez
The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison
Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie
Me and Earl and the Dying Girl by Jesse Andrews
Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher
Crank by Ellen Hopkins
The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini
I8r, g8r by Lauren Myracle
This Book Is Gay by Juno Dawson
Melissa by Alex Gino
Looking for Alaska by John Green
Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kuklin
Beloved by Toni Morrison
This One Summer by Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki
Drama: A Graphic Novel by Raina Telgemeier
Flamer by Mike Curato
Jack of Hearts (and other parts) by L.C. Rosen
The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel
The Breakaways by Cathy G. Johnson
Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult
All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky
Tricks by Ellen Hopkins
More Happy Than Not by Adam Silvera
Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer
It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health by Robie Harris
Monday's Not Coming by Tiffany D. Jackson
A Court of Mist and Fury by Sarah J. Maas
Sold by Patricia McCormick
The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives by Dashka Slater
Dear Martin by Nic Stone
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson
Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen by Jazz Jennings
Almost Perfect by Brian Katcher
Real Live Boyfriends: yes. boyfriends, plural. if my life weren't complicated, I wouldn't be Ruby Oliver by E. Lockhart
The Truth About Alice by Jennifer Mathieu
Lucky by Alice Sebold
Killing Mr. Griffin by Lois Duncan
We Are the Ants by Shaun David Hutchinson
I Am Jazz by Jazz Jennings and Jessica Herthel
How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi
Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan
The Infinite Moment of Us by Lauren Myracle
Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds
And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell

Source: PEN America data from 2021–22 school year

MORE RIDICULOUS STORIES

Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation

An illustrated adaptation of *The Diary of a Young Girl was* banned from a high school library in Florida, because, critics bizarrely claimed, it minimized the Holocaust and—perhaps more important—captured a young girl's thoughts about other female bodies. A county chapter chair of the far-right group Moms for Liberty led the charge for removal over its "sexually explicit" material.

Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes

The director of a Florida police union targeted this book about a Black boy killed by police. "Our members feel that this book is propaganda that pushes an inaccurate and absurd stereotype of police officers in America," he wrote. Further use of the book was paused in a classroom in Broward County.

In the Dream House by Carmen Maria Machado

A Leander, Texas, parent went after Machado's surreal memoir about domestic abuse, brandishing a sex toy at a school board meeting while decrying portions of the book detailing a lesbian relationship. "This is what we're asking our children to read," the parent said, taking out a pink dildo. The book was ultimately removed from school libraries in the district.

Maus by Art Spiegelman

In January 2022, a Tennessee school board voted unanimously to ban this Pulitzer-winning graphic novel from its eighth grade curriculum. The book depicts Holocaust victims as mice and Nazis as cats. One board member took offense at illustrations of naked mice in the book. "All the way through this literature we expose these kids to nakedness, we expose them to vulgarity.... If I was trying to indoctrinate somebody's kids, this is how I would do it," he said. TNR

Jasmine Liu *is a reporter-researcher at* **The New Republic.**

Artificial intelligence once seemed as if it would make us healthier and more prosperous.

Now, thanks to the dominance of a familiar cast of tech titans, it appears our options are limited to gimmicky chatbots or total annihilation.

HOW AI WENT FROM FANTASY TO DYSTOPIA

By Mike Pearl

Illustration by Anson Chan

Imagine a future where you're being interviewed by antagonistic police officers in a foreign country, but an artificially intelligent "agent" on your mobile device is able to keep you from saying anything locals would consider abnormal or suspicious, and prevent your arrest. That same day, your agent attends a post-op appointment with your mother's neurosurgeon, and helps her ask substantive questions about the risks of each treatment path. The next day, your agent notices subtle signs of developmental trouble in your infant child, and advises that you seek out an aggressive regimen of therapy years earlier than you might have otherwise.

If situations like these—in which artificial intelligence materially improves a normal person's life in tangible ways—still feel well out of reach, that's because the tech industry seems to want it that way. And if the whole topic of "AI" makes you cringe, that's just as well for the companies poised to profit from it, because a public with high expectations about their lives being improved by the technology could become a liability.

It may be all the better for the tech titans if the public expects everything to actively get worse as AI spreads. Just listen to the industry's leaders' own words. "I try to be up-front," Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, the firm behind the phenomenon ChatGPT, told *The New York Times* in 2019. "Am I doing something good? Or really bad?" Demis Hassabis, a pioneer who co-founded Google DeepMind, one of the tech giant's AI projects, has attempted a similar routine, telling *Time*, "When it comes to very powerful technologies—and obviously AI is going to be one of the most powerful ever—we need to be careful." He added that many people working with it "don't realize they're holding dangerous material."

In theory, anyone with a functioning imagination should find it at least a little exhilarating that the latest supposed technological revolution is something called "artificial intelligence," despite its current status as a business buzzword. After all, even the most enervating, corporatized definition of the term holds immense promise. On that front, McKinsey, that lodestar of anodyne corporatespeak, is actually somewhat helpful. According to its 2020 white paper titled "An executive's guide to AI," it is not an individual technology, but an attribute of many: "the ability of a machine to perform cognitive functions we associate with human minds, such as perceiving, reasoning, learning, and problem solving."

The word "cognitive" is still a little presumptuous, but it's a useful definition. You can apply it to what *Wired* called the "uncanny, addictive AI" of the social-media app TikTok's recommendation algorithm. Or to the creepily human—if factually compromised—text outputs of the so-called chatbot ChatGPT, which takes text requests (or "prompts") and offers a synthesis of whatever it can scrape (true or otherwise) from the internet, accompanied by the product of the model's fine-tuning by human beings, back at you.

But it's long been a bit of an afterthought in AI literature—and attendant mythology—that these machines might have some kind of practical purpose that average people can benefit from.

For instance, the most influential mass market AI book is probably 1999's *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, by computer scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil. It's mostly about the creation of a superior kind of artificial consciousness, and humanity's eventual assimilation into this enhanced state of being. However, along the way, Kurzweil predicts that machines will take care of "the basic necessities of food, shelter, and security," and that there will soon be "almost no human employment in production, agriculture, and transportation." To Kurzweil, these revelations seem to be a mere detour from humans' cognitive ascent to a kind of digital nirvana, rather than, you know, the point of the whole thing.

The problem, as contemporary AI proliferates in the real world and our collective imagination, is that to most people outside of Silicon Valley, digital nirvana isn't at all tempting. We have more practical needs, like jobs and health care. But also: We already live in a world dominated by tech companies—and we hate it.

Despite the public's fascination with chatbots, image generator applications, and other eye-popping AI tools and toys that have come along in the past year, many of us are anxious about the future they'll create. Americans in particular are hyperaware of what AI may do to employment. We've already seen examples of these systems being horrifically racist: A Facebook AI system once mistook videos of Black men for "videos about Primates," and several Black people have been wrongfully arrested after facial recognition software misidentified them as suspects in crimes. We know social-media and other tech companies and the bosses who own them can't be trusted; the very damning *The Social Network* won Oscars all the way back in 2011. And yet, in response to our worries about the Next Big Thing in tech, we're fed either Kurzweil-style sermons about the ascendancy of our species, or fresh prophecies of doom.

But it's not too much to ask that the people who stand to gain enormously from the proliferation of these technologies—the rich people who own or control them—be both enthusiastic about them and able to explain, in convincing and granular terms, why the rest of the people of Earth should be, too. By not painting normal people a clear picture of a better world and promising us that they'll get us there, tech impresarios are only protecting themselves. They seem to be planning their defense at their eventual tribunals, and that's far from good enough.

The ChatGPT Smoke Screen

AI DIDN'T COME ALONG in the past year, but the hysteria around it did reach comical new heights. That hysteria has largely centered on ChatGPT. This focus is obscuring AI's real potential and the fact that ordinary people stand—or at least should stand—to benefit from that potential in ways that go far beyond sending emails more quickly, populating their website with SEO-friendly content, or patching up code.

What chatbots do is basically a magic trick. Something called a large language model reduces language to numerical "tokens," and puts them in order based on the probability that a given token will come next in a sequence. Then, the model—fed by the content of the internet and "trained" by low-wage workers across the planet—spits language back at you. The concept is older than you might think.

In 1726, Jonathan Swift more or less predicted, and preemptively satirized, ChatGPT in *Gulliver's Travels*. When the naïve Gulliver visits the grand academy of Lagado, he meets—and is greatly impressed by—a professor who has invented an "engine" full of words arrayed on moving die-size cubes, calibrated to the "strictest computation of the general proportion there is in books between the numbers of particles, nouns, and verbs, and other parts of speech." When put to use—an operation that requires a team of humans to crank its many knobs—the engine churns out snippets of text, and the harebrained professor claims that one day his machine will allow "the most ignorant person" to "write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, laws, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study."

This may sound familiar to Americans who have read about ChatGPT users asking the tech to write them barbed essays with the wit of Voltaire, or a short story in the trademark register of Hemingway. But somewhat more quietly in the background, applications like HyperWrite's Personal Assistant have cropped up, which can theoretically do almost anything for you, as long as it can be done in a web browser, including complex tasks that combine the communication skills of a large language model with the ability to plan, and then execute that plan. These are among the first plausible AI agents, and more will follow.

If things keep progressing at the current pace, a much more powerful sort of intelligence—no more sentient than ChatGPT, but powered by capacities approaching what computer scientists call strong AI, or "artificial general intelligence" (AGI)—could come along soon. It may run on something like the language models that power the chatbots we already have. But where ChatGPT needs to be fed text inputs, a system with AGI could take information in any format, and its model would be able to analyze, learn, and modify itself based on that information.

Such a machine could, in theory, make our dreams come true.

The Bizarre Expectations Game of the AI Hypemen

TOOLS OF UNPRECEDENTED POWER in the hands of ordinary people should be an easy concept to sell, but the salespeople for these technologies are decidedly not making that pitch. That's probably because they're the wrong people to make that pitch—and we likely wouldn't believe them if they did.

On one hand, people like Altman can, when the situation calls for it, wax downright messianic about the utopia they're allegedly taking us to. Altman has said in no uncertain terms that building AGI is OpenAI's overarching goal, and suggests there'll one day be an AI-based tool that can "cure all diseases," whatever that means. Altman is more famous, however, for his grim forecasts, as when he appeared before the U.S. Senate in May, and said his "worst fears are that we—the field, the technology, the industry—cause significant harm to the world," and that, "if this technology goes wrong, it can go quite wrong." This came after Altman had said in March, "I think people should be happy that we are a little bit scared of this."

"Implicit in this argument," the *Los Angeles Times*' Brian Merchant pointed out in a column, "is the notion that we should simply trust him and his newly cloistered company with how best to [release this technology], even as they work to meet revenue projections of $1 billion next year."

Tech leaders probably think they're describing something promising for normies. Altman, for his part, generally stops at saying AI will "massively increase productivity." I reached out to Altman and asked him to make the "case for AI being beneficial to normal people," but a representative said he was unavailable for an interview. Bill Gates gamed out what consumers will do with AI during a Q&A session way back in 2019, describing "the so-called personal agent that is permissioned in to see all your information and helps you instead of you running 20 applications." He said Microsoft's potential product of this sort would likely be available as a paid subscription. Billionaire venture capitalist Marc Andreessen's now-notorious blog post "Why AI Will Save the World" includes a litany of areas he thinks AI may positively impact, a few of which might interest a non-billionaire, like "understanding others' perspectives, creative arts, parenting outcomes, and life satisfaction." But it's not exactly crystal clear how.

The collective inability—or refusal—to be specific about why we should be excited about AI defines the tech elite of our time.

Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn and a billionaire supporter of AI, claimed in a YouTube video earlier this year that the rise of AI marked a "Promethean moment." I asked him to clarify what, exactly, made AI Promethean. It was, after all, something of a disturbing analogy: In Greek mythology, learning to make fire wasn't all gravy for the humans, who started fighting wars and were driven away from the gods—nor for Prometheus, who was sentenced to have his liver chewed on by an eagle for eternity.

To his credit, Hoffman did elaborate, but it was another rather fuzzy prophecy. Fire, Hoffman told me, "gives humanity self-determination, the power to pursue its own destiny and make its own meaning." He said that it is "self-definition through innovation that I think defines us as human beings. That's what I mean when I talk about 'Homo Techne' as a better name for us than Homo Sapiens." Humanity will put AI "in countless contexts and complementary technologies," he said, and then we will "attain new heights of civilization and human flourishing."

If you're still having a difficult time pinning down where tech "thought leaders" are on AI, you should be. In March came the alarmed open letter titled "Pause Giant AI Experiments," which was signed by such luminaries as Elon Musk, Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, and social critic Yuval Noah Harari. "Powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable," the letter said, calling for a six-month pause on large-scale AI development. Less than four months later, signatory Musk announced that he had founded an AI company.

Oren Etzioni, a computer scientist and the founding CEO of the Allen Institute for AI, the research nonprofit started by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, offered a bit more detail on what this crowd thinks is coming. Specifically, he linked me to a story about a brain-spine interface that relied on what *The New York Times*' Oliver Whang called an "artificial intelligence thought decoder," which had helped a patient with a spine injury regain the ability to walk. Etzioni is a great conversationalist, and was in a much less dreamy and more direct mode than Hoffman. He was uncompromising in his optimism, and told me he disagreed with the idea of a six-month pause. (I worked briefly last year on a since-scuttled collaboration between the Allen Institute and *The Seattle Times*.)

But as for what normal people should imagine for the future? "I'm not going to promise anything too specific," Etzioni told me. Referring to technology companies in general, he added, "People can look at our track record."

The track record of tech entrepreneurs, though, is a troubled one at best. And they seem to know it.

One can debate whether, for instance, the Luddites—textile workers who smashed the machines that some of the earliest tech entrepreneurs had used to annihilate many of their livelihoods at the kickoff of the Industrial Revolution—were unfairly maligned (answer: yes). But it's more useful to look just at tech's track record since the rise of the iPhone in 2007, perhaps the last moment of unbridled, widely shared optimism in modern technology.

Sixteen years later, smartphones are an obligatory biannual money-dumping ritual. Social media is all "fever swamps," "hellsites," and addictive, mental health–degrading apps that the government wants (not unreasonably) to regulate or outright ban. Democrats and Republicans alike distrust social media—and they should. Spotify has nuked musicians' livelihoods. Airbnb kicked fuel on the fire of our housing crisis. And the gig economy further disempowered America's already precarious workers.

These days, new tech seems to smash into our lives and reshape them every few years. Then it becomes crucial. Then it starts to suck. The phenomenon is called "enshittification," a term coined by author Cory Doctorow that's spread like wildfire this year. Tech services begin their lives as promising and user-focused, then become advertiser-focused and start to enshittify. After this, Doctorow's theory goes, they tend to exclusively prioritize the needs of shareholders and their demands for increased revenue. At this point, beloved features cease to exist or become paywalled, the user experience degrades, and the enshittification is complete.

Is it possible to avoid such a future with AI? It should be. But the government would need to do a hell of a lot more than it's done to rein in Big Tech monopolies to make it plausible.

The Wrong Way to Do AI

ALTMAN AND OTHER AI WISEMEN expressing fear about the technology have done what might seem logical, and announced interest in erecting safeguards. "The regulation of AI is essential," he told Congress in May. But it's abundantly clear that OpenAI and the other AI-focused companies want to be the driving force behind the regulatory apparatus. We can't let that happen.

OpenAI lobbied heavily to soften the European Union's AI Act, the most meaningful set of regulations on the technology passed so far by any lawmaking body in the world, *Time* reported. The company did this by arguing successfully that its language model "is not a high-risk system," and that it shouldn't be regulated as inherently "high-risk." According to the version of the law that passed, it won't be. Then, in late July, OpenAI, Anthropic, Google, and Microsoft, operating as a sort of bloc, formed a group called the Frontier Model Forum, membership in which is exclusive to "large-scale machine-learning models that exceed the capabilities currently present in the most advanced existing models," according to the forum's criteria. In other words, big kids only. The aim of the forum is ostensibly to promote safety research within the companies themselves, and foster communications between the AI industry and lawmakers. But it appears to be a lobby that exists to sculpt government action to fit its own vision.

An eerily familiar juggernaut is on the horizon: Government and Big Tech seem to be unifying in pursuit of economic growth. The Biden administration's restrictions on China's access to the advanced GPUs that power AI development suggest the United States senses an advantage in its economic knock-down, drag-out with its rival, and isn't about to let off the gas.

Certainly, tech has sometimes powered the economy in ways that benefited the masses. Workers made real gains during the early days of the increasingly unionized automotive industry, for instance. But around the mid–twentieth century came trends toward deregulation and the decline of organized labor. Then, as Daron Acemoglu, an MIT economist and his co-author, Simon Johnson, write in this year's *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*, "digital technologies became the graveyard of shared prosperity."

According to them, "A new, more inclusive vision of technology can emerge only if the basis of social power changes." The authors call for "the rise of counterarguments and organizations that can stand up to the conventional wisdom. Confronting the prevailing vision and wresting the direction of technology away from the control of a narrow elite may even be more difficult today than it was in nineteenth-century Britain and America. But it is no less essential."

This, in turn, would require individuals who aren't Big Tech TED Talkers or CEOs to discern what AI's capabilities are and demand specific, beneficial things from it. Insisting on a beneficial rollout of this technology—not just one that steers clear of the apocalypse—is reasonable. Crouching in revulsion, and hoping we survive when the tech steamroller inevitably rolls over us once again, is not.

A Path Toward Something Good

WHEN STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY art professor Stephanie Dinkins met Hanson Robotics' Bina48, a talking robot whose AI model was trained on the actual words of a Black woman named Bina Aspen, she was dazzled. Then she was irked by the things she didn't like about it. She was glad the tech world was putting in the effort to represent Black women like her, but not won over by its accuracy.

"If we're making these technologies, and even the folks who are trying to do so well are doing it in a way that's PC, and flattens us as humans, what does that mean going forward?" she recalled wondering. It didn't make her want to write off AI as a technology. It made her want to steer it.

"And so the question became, *Can I make something like that*?"

"There are two ways in which the public can benefit from any technology: They can own it, or the technology goes in a direction that then generates high wages and high employment."

—Daron Acemoglu

Dinkins, who emphasized repeatedly that she is not a coder, told me she ultimately found useful code on a platform called Hugging Face, a database of open-source models. Since then, she's been using her own chatbot, and other AI tools, to help her students push past the assumptions consumer-facing AI technology makes about them.

Dinkins's software is not polished. "My chatbot is stupid," she said. "It doesn't work well. It actually doesn't have enough data to be expansive, but it does a good enough job to get us thinking about what we want from these systems." It is also, she suggested, a little edgier than what's available to consumers, in part because she encourages students to ask, "How far can you push it?"

Relying on open-source software has the advantage of making collaboration easy, and rendering your work transparent and flexible. Anyone, anywhere, can be your collaborator—and if your project is popular online, people can come out of the woodwork with fixes and new ideas. In May, an internal memo by an anonymous Google engineer leaked, which Google's head of AI later confirmed to be genuine. The tone was panicked, and it described the open-source community as a threat to software dominance that the big AI companies like Google and OpenAI have no hope of quelling.

"I do think that open-source development is more likely to produce AI that empowers individuals than the tech giants," sci-fi author and AI commentator Ted Chiang told me when I asked him about a positive vision for the technology. "Obviously, there are dangers with open-source, as seen with deepfake porn, but the tech giants pose major threats, too, just of a different sort."

Dinkins's approach to building generative AI is promising not just because it's anarchic and leans on open-source technology, but also because it's almost uncomfortably personal and intimate. Training her chatbot required a large corpus of text just to reach baseline functionality. Suggestions from others included Reddit—a famously contentious place that has hosted its share of white supremacy, and a source she dismissed outright—and the Cornell Movie-Dialogs Corpus, a collection of conversations from hundreds of movies. (That didn't sit right with her either, because movies, she said, "have not been too friendly, or very supportive, to Blackness.")

Instead of one of these datasets, she said, "I made oral histories with my family." With those, along with some other carefully curated materials, she told me she "had a big enough dataset to make something sort of viable."

The idea of some future ChatGPT trained on the text of your family narrating the details of their lives in natural speech might sound downright alarming. But Dinkins's chatbot is not ChatGPT. She is in charge of her language model. She chooses who has access to it, and she puts it to her own uses. It's hers, and it's guided by her own vision.

"There are two ways in which the public can benefit from any technology: They can own it, or the technology goes in a direction that then generates high wages and high employment," Acemoglu, the economist, told me. He stressed that the public owning the whole AI sector—turning it into a state-owned enterprise like one you might see in China—isn't his first choice, though it may be for some on the left.

In any case, Acemoglu said, the key questions should be the same no matter how far to the left someone is: "Can we use this technology to empower people? Because if you do that, it pushes up wages for diverse skills, and that's the best way of serving the public."

The theoretical possibilities that kicked off this essay may have creeped you out, or sounded more thorny than they did utopian. I proposed a rudimentary concept along those lines to Chiang, and shared similar ideas with another sci-fi author, Yudhanjaya Wijeratne, since they're much better storytellers than I, and the fictional scenarios were ultimately shaped by what they said. Chiang, for instance, told me he "certainly wondered about the possibility of a personal AI agent which works on your behalf rather than on a company's behalf, and whether there's a viable business model for such a thing."

I have my own ideas about how or even whether an AI agent that purports to advocate for older people seeking medical care—which, to be clear, does not yet exist—should be a profit-making enterprise. That's just one of the subjects that ought to be active topics for discussion among people who don't work in Big Tech. Currently, these questions are being mulled over in the corridors of power, well before the rest of us have the chance to form our own answers.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying we all need to (or should) think happy thoughts about AI and hope against hope that our dreams will come true. But if ordinary people have a reasonable, shared vision for what AI can do for us, then even if it doesn't materialize, we'll be able to articulate exactly what Big Tech stole away.

Tech bosses hold a monopoly on visions for the AI future. It should be smashed as soon as possible. TNR

Mike Pearl *is Mashable's lead editor and the author of* The Day It Finally Happens: Alien Contact, Dinosaur Parks, Immortal Humans—and Other Possible Phenomena.

Those protests against Bud Light earlier this year just scratched the surface.

Today's right is trying to construct an entire parallel economy, built around brands with "values alignment" and blacklists of "woke" banks.

Where will these people stop?

Ketchup With Those Fries? Sure—as Long as It's Anti-Woke.

By Kathryn Joyce

Illustration by Nicolás Ortega

On a sunny July morning

in Manhattan, Donald Trump Jr.; his fiancée, former Fox News host Kimberly Guilfoyle; and former Mike Pence chief of staff Nick Ayers stood on the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange, beaming down at the trading floor below. With them were a pair of less familiar faces: Michael Seifert, CEO of the conservative "America-first" marketplace PublicSq., and financier Omeed Malik, whose company, Colombier Acquisition Corp., had just merged with Seifert's. That morning, their combined company was going public for the first time. When the clock hit 9:30, and Seifert pressed the button to trigger the opening bell, a crowd of supporters burst into applause, then a booming and sustained chant of "USA." At CNBC's trading floor news desk, a visibly annoyed Jim Cramer paused on air to let the chants play out while his co-host covered his ears.

All of it—the triumphant moment, the stadium chants, Cramer's pained expression (especially Cramer's pained expression)—was trumpeted across conservative media as an encapsulation of what the moment represented. Namely, that "The deplorables are taking over wall st!"; "The patriot economy has arrived"; or, as Seifert had put it earlier, that "We the People"—a specifically defined group—now had their own marketplace, as a first step toward creating "a parallel economy for Americans sick of woke corporations."

Just a year or two ago, and for a century beforehand, the notion that conservatives needed to conquer Wall Street would have seemed incomprehensible, the very premise redundant. But PublicSq.'s moment at the NYSE capped a season of furious right-wing boycotts, beginning with Bud Light. In April, conservatives became incensed after 26-year-old trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney released an Instagram video showing off a promotional can of Bud Light, adorned with Mulvaney's face, that Anheuser-Busch had sent her as one of its micro-ambassadors. A vicious right-wing backlash ensued, featuring bomb threats against breweries, an aged Kid Rock shooting up beer cans, and a conservative entrepreneur, who'd previously hawked "Let's Go Brandon" wrapping paper, rapidly launching the "woke free" Ultra Right lager (not quite a steal at $20 per six-pack). Despite the fact that Anheuser-Busch almost immediately caved to the pressure—abandoning Mulvaney, sidelining the staff who oversaw her ad, rolling out new ads with football players, and sponsoring country music concerts—the boycott went on, as right-wing media gleefully tallied declining sales.

But Bud Light was just the start. In May, it was Target's turn, as conservatives eager to best last year's attacks on Pride month leaped to protest the retailer for releasing a large LGBTQ-themed product line. Then it was Walmart, then Kohl's, for similar reasons. Then Lego, after false rumors spread that the toy company was selling "transgender building sets." Conservatives even turned on Chick-fil-A, the fast-food franchise long associated with conservative Christian politics and antipathy to LGBTQ rights, which nonetheless became a target after conservatives discovered the company had a preexisting diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, initiative ("Chick-fil-A, you are no longer the Lord's chicken," cried a Turning Point USA contributor). Turning Point founder Charlie Kirk lamented that he no longer knew what brands to trust: "I'm going through my refrigerator," asking, "'Is this ketchup bottle woke? Is this mustard?'"

Amid the boycotts came a range of new services to help conservatives avoid buying "woke": a phone app, Veebs, that allows customers to scan supermarket barcodes to check a product's "V Score" and find "brands with the best values alignment"; a whitelist of conservative companies put out by the right-wing CatholicVote; an anti-woke browser extension that "displays a warning message for websites, companies, and brands that engage in wokeness," based on a keyword search. In April, Washington-based Consumers' Research—a once-mainstream consumer advocacy group that's been transformed into a right-wing watchdog—released a "Woke Alert" text service, blasting out updates on companies that put "progressive activists and their dangerous agendas ahead of customers." The alert's initial warnings against Bud Light and Jack Daniel's (for sponsoring a 2021 Pride campaign) were soon joined by many others: the Walt Disney Company, Bank of America, and NASCAR, for funding LGBTQ youth organization The Trevor Project; Chobani yogurt, Meta, and Starbucks, for supporting abortion rights; Country Music Television, because it stopped playing Jason Aldean's "Try That in a Small Town"; Kroger supermarkets, for making employees wear aprons with rainbow hearts.

But even during this hot boycott summer, there were doubters. On his podcast in May, Senator Ted Cruz signaled his skepticism about how successful they could be, since "historically, conservatives have typically been not very good" at boycotts, and, further, that staying away from a major chain like Target is harder than finding another light beer. Enter the parallel economy, which, depending on who defines the term, is anything from the restoration of free enterprise, a collection of grifting conservative knockoffs, a mass opting-out from the mainstream economy, or an illusion.

In response to the deplatforming of various far-right influencers over the last several years, conservatives have increasingly begun arguing for a movement-size divestment from "companies that hate you," in the words of The Daily Wire's co-founder Jeremy Boreing (who himself launched a line of mail-order razors, after

a mainstream company dropped its ad deal with the right-wing outlet). "It's time corporate America felt the weight of its woke posturing, and face conservative competitors that call them on their bluff," Boreing wrote in 2022. To that end, he pledged that The Daily Wire would invest $100 million in alternative ventures "to serve those tired of being forced to fund woke media companies, like Disney." The left might dismiss them, Boreing warned, and "in their hubris" would "continue to bifurcate the culture without any fear of economic consequences. Meanwhile, we'll be bifurcating the economy."

Anti-Abortion Protein Bars?

THE IDEA DIDN'T START with Bud Light. In January 2021, days after Joe Biden was inaugurated, Andrew Torba, the Pennsylvania-born founder of the far-right social media platform Gab, called on Christians to begin building alternative systems to prepare for a communist takeover. "It will end in ash," Torba told the right-wing Catholic outlet Church Militant, "and when it does get to that point, which is inevitable, Christians will have a firm foundation, a firm economy, and a firm internet and businesses—all those services and community that we have built up over the course of decades."

Besides apocalyptic visions, Torba, a self-described Christian nationalist, had a more personal motivation. For years, Gab has courted some of the most noxious personalities on the far right to participate on its platform, from Catholic antisemite E. Michael Jones to white supremacist groyper king Nick Fuentes. In October 2018, after another of its frequent posters killed 11 people in a mass shooting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue, Gab was dropped from its web-hosting service and payment processors PayPal and Stripe. "From that moment forward, we decided that we would never allow something like this to happen again," Torba later wrote, referring not to the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history but to Gab's demonetization. "Not to Gab and not to anyone else who shares our values."

Soon, Torba—a former ad tech CEO who was booted from a prestigious Silicon Valley startup network for spewing anti-immigrant abuse at fellow alums after Donald Trump's 2016 victory ("I helped meme a President into office, cucks")—was incorporating the parallel economy into nearly everything Gab did. The footers of Gab emails urge readers to "Join the Parallel Economy." Torba hailed Gab as the place where conservatives could find everything from "dissident" media and politicians to "dissident" doctors who'd write tele-prescriptions for Ivermectin. "They can't cancel us here," he promised, "because we are building our own—everything." He launched GabPay, a PayPal alternative; Gab Marketplace, a Facebook Marketplace clone; and a parallel economy Christmas catalog. When he spoke at Fuentes's America First Political Action Conference in early 2022—itself a CPAC alternative, where Fuentes that year praised both Putin and Hitler—Torba exhorted the young crowd to "work together towards the common goal of building parallel Christian systems that are beyond the influence and control of the existing demonic ones." Even Gab's name, he suggested, embodied the message: "Go And Build." This year, frustrated that he couldn't get ChatGPT to say that Jews killed Jesus, or write a blog post about the immorality of Drag Queen Story Hours, Torba announced he would launch Gab AI as an artificial intelligence product "that is based, has no 'hate speech' filters and doesn't obfuscate and distort historical and Biblical Truth."

In creating Gab, Torba was in part reacting to the deplatforming of far-right companies and personalities across the internet. "This is a response to us," said Nandini Jammi, co-founder of the progressive activist group Check Your Ads, which seeks to "dismantle the disinformation economy" by lobbying ad tech companies and ad exchanges to drop sponsorship of far-right actors for violating the group's policies against hate speech, disinformation, harassment, and more. In the years since Trump's election, Jammi and her fellow activists—first at the progressive social media action group Sleeping Giants, now at her own organization—have claimed a number of victories: costing "home of the Alt Right" Breitbart News 90 percent of its ad revenue in 2017; getting far-right activist Laura Loomer kicked off PayPal in 2019; and perhaps playing a role in YouTube and Google Ads dropping right-wing commentator Dan Bongino earlier last year, to name a few. As a result, Jammi said, Bongino has become "very, very invested in the parallel economy, because he's personally seen how quickly things can go south."

When right-wing social network Parler was removed from Apple and Google app stores, as well as Amazon's web-hosting platform, over its role in the January 6 Capitol riots, Bongino—one of Parler's investors—co-founded an alt-payment processor, called simply Parallel Economy, that promised to be the backbone of a "censor-resistant ecosystem." Tagline: "Don't let Big Tech hold your business hostage." The right-wing alt-video platform Rumble became an early investor.

But in recent months, calls for a right-wing parallel economy have moved far beyond Gab and Parler, propelled in part by the Bud Light and Target protests. As PublicSq.'s Michael Seifert told the conservative video website PragerU, "The boycotts have been successful," but even better "is taking the next step and putting our dollars behind companies that actually deserve them." All that money taken out of Anheuser-Busch and Target has to go somewhere, and Seifert wants to move it "to the companies that are doing right by this country, that have not been robbed by ESG and DEI philosophies, that are actually prioritizing meritocracy, quality products, providing value for shareholders."

A lot of companies are making that pitch. Listen to Salem Radio and you can hear Charlie Kirk read ad spots for a patriotic butcher or "Judeo-Christian" financial adviser service. Watch Kimberly Guilfoyle's Rumble channel and learn about the noninsurance health plans and identity theft services offered by Patriot Lifestyle. Another sponsor of both Gab and Kirk, My Patriot Supply, sells survival ration kits advertised with the promise, "You won't regret it when the SHTF."

The companies run the gamut. For years, Patriot Mobile has sold itself as the premier conservative alt-cell phone carrier. (Last year, it proved its bona fides by channeling $600,000 into 11 school board races in Texas.) Now there's also America First Insurance, Liberation Tek web-hosting, Tim Pool's new freedom-supporting "parallel economy" coffee (joining a crowded field that includes North Arrow Coffee, which bills itself as Christian and anti-abortion, and Black Rifle Coffee, with guns, flags, and firefighters on its packaging), even a BlazeTV host's promise to start manufacturing parallel economy supplements, including "dick pills," soon. There's a forthcoming parallel economy theme park in Oklahoma, and parallel economy money, with movement enthusiasts trading tips for where one can use the untraceable cryptocurrency Monero (the preferred choice of Andrew Anglin, founder of the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer) to buy farm-direct produce.

There's also RedBalloon, an anti-woke job database that promises to help conservatives find work with right-wing employers and was founded by an elder of a controversial Idaho church whose pastor is a slavery apologist.

Inevitably, there will soon be a conference, too—RePlatform: The Parallel Economy Convention, hosted in Las Vegas this March by a boutique New York brand consultancy and the anti-vaccination group Defeat the Mandates. Panels include "How to Red-Pill Others Into the Parallel Economy Without Blowing Up Your Company" and "Profiting From Cancel Culture."

PublicSq. wants to become the central repository of this sprawling universe. Since conservatives began boycotting Bud Light, Seifert has said, they've seen an 800 percent increase in searches for beer on the site. That's perhaps not too meaningful, given that, until recently, few people likely looked to an anti-abortion, family-friendly website to buy suds. But it's a model PublicSq. is eagerly trying to replicate for its more than 55,000 sellers (which get vetted and must pledge not to publicly denigrate PublicSq.'s "five core values"). On the company's blog, product substitutions abound. Customers can "Ditch Warby Parker" over its embrace of "LGBTQ+ corporate responsibility" and buy eyewear from Christian sunglasses company Zivah instead. They can swap Patagonia—for "literally handing their company over to 'Mother Earth'" and supporting Black Lives Matter—for patriotic "outleisure" clothing brand Choona. Or buy anti-abortion protein bars, anti-vaccination probiotics, and teeth whiteners that don't "virtue signal."

As of late May, PublicSq. claimed to have more than a million registered customers, about double the number of users it had in March. Just before the company went public in July, it signed an advertising deal worth more than $1 million with former Fox host Tucker Carlson, marking the first commercial investment in Carlson's new Twitter-based streaming show. (Omeed Malik, Axios reported, also plans to invest in Carlson's media company through his investment firm, 1789 Capital.) And right around then, after news came that Bud Light was downsizing 350 workers, Seifert took to Twitter for another sort of victory lap, declaring that PublicSq. and RedBalloon would distribute the résumés of any interested laid-off Bud Light employees to its network of "non-woke," "pro-America businesses."

Is the GOP Losing Big Business?

THERE'S A TENDENCY to think of consumer activism and boycotts as tools of the left, recalling the Montgomery bus boycott, the United Farm Workers' grape boycott, or the divestment campaign against apartheid South Africa. Long before Bud Light, after all, there was a decades-long campaign against Coors, as University of La Verne history professor Allyson Brantley detailed in her recent book, *Brewing a Boycott*. Over the course of 30 years, a multifaceted coalition protested the brewery—first in the form of a 1950s labor struggle against the company's union-busting; then as a 1960s "urban counterpart" to the United Farm Workers' produce boycotts, because Coors wasn't hiring Mexican Americans; then by queer activists in the 1970s, to demonstrate the power of the LGBTQ dollar; then as a more general progressive boycott in response to the Coors family's right-wing politics. It was a durable, intensely organized effort that brought together multiple demographics working toward a shared end.

But the right has long played this game, too. According to Cornell historian Lawrence Glickman, author of *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, segregationists used economic pressure to target companies like Ford or Philip Morris for donating to integrationist causes and boycotted TV shows with interracial casts. A century before that, there were dueling boycotts over slavery, as Northern abolitionists set up "free produce" stores, selling foods that didn't rely on slave labor, while the South built a corresponding "nonintercourse" movement, pledging to boycott Northern-made goods. "One thing I'm not sure about in terms of this current movement," Glickman said, "is whether they want this niche to become mainstream and dominant, or whether they're happy for it to be like the free produce people," with tiny stores "where the clothes were ugly and the candy tasted terrible."

It's a good question. But so far the parallel economy doesn't seem to be one thing. Is it viral videos of conservatives shooting at 12-packs or calling Target satanic, to starve mainstream companies into compliance? Yes. Is it the creation of a ban-proof internet, where neither bigoted speech nor insurrectionist organizing will cost conservatives their platforms? Also yes. Is it the next "positive" step, as PublicSq. describes it, to create a universe of moral purchasing, in service of a larger ecosystem to come? That, too. For others still, it's the creation of a more holistic alternative order, akin to *The Benedict Option*'s advice that conservatives withdraw from an irredeemable world.

For the political right at large, it's also part of an ongoing realignment—in image, at least, if not reality—in which Republicans are changing their relationship to corporate America.

This spring, former Bill Clinton adviser Mark Penn and Yale management professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld wrote in *Time* about "how the GOP lost Big Business," as CEOs broke ranks with Republicans on social issues, and Republican politicians retaliated with legal threats and new laws. In this new war, they wrote, there were multiple fronts. One focused on broad corporate support for diversity policies and actions against states that discriminate, such as PayPal's 2016 decision to cancel plans for a facility in North Carolina, after the state passed the nation's first anti-trans "bathroom bill." Another was over environmental, social, and governance, or ESG, standards in investing, as corporations and financial entities began to factor issues like climate change impact into their business decisions. Beyond those, much as corporate America enjoyed Trump's tax cuts, they were perturbed by the social instability that accompanied them, and after the January 6 riots, numerous companies suspended donations to legislators who refused to certify Biden's win.

These changes have caused some bewildering reconfigurations in how politicians talk about business, as Republicans use all the legislative and administrative tools at their disposal to threaten and censure certain companies, and Democrats—some Democrats—clamor to defend the free market, as when Representative Maxine Waters denounced the GOP this July as "anti-capitalist, anti-investor, anti-business, and anti-American."

The most prominent early example of this fight, of course, came from Florida, in Governor Ron DeSantis's ongoing battle with Disney for criticizing his Parental Rights in Education Act, which as of this year bars public schools from teaching students about LGBTQ issues, with limited exceptions, from kindergarten to twelfth grade. When DeSantis opened this battlefront in 2022, Christopher Rufo, the conservative activist who's become his

The companies run the gamut. For years, Patriot Mobile has sold itself as the premier conservative alt-cell phone carrier. Now there's also America First Insurance, Liberation Tek web-hosting, and "parallel economy" coffee (North Arrow Coffee, which bills itself as Christian and anti-abortion, and Black Rifle Coffee, with guns, flags, and firefighters on its packaging).

right-hand ideas man, described it as part of a larger effort to "lay siege" to cultural institutions long ceded to the left, including businesses functioning as "ideological and economic cartels, dictating the terms from up on high down to the average citizen."

The first step in fighting back, Rufo said, lay in convincing conservatives that benign-sounding concepts like diversity were actually leftist code, and then combining the resultant popular outrage with government force to bring those institutions to heel. When Rufo published a series of claims charging that Disney sought to "fundamentally change the relationship between kids and sexuality in the United States," the furious aftermath involved an array of proposed legislative punishments, from Florida vowing to rescind the company's special tax status to Congress threatening to reject its copyright extension requests. This winter, DeSantis stacked the oversight board that governs Disney's special tax district with political allies and donors, including a Moms for Liberty co-founder who is married to the head of the state GOP. The next day, he wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that "old-fashioned corporate Republicanism won't do in a world where the left has hijacked big business." This spring, shortly after announcing his presidential candidacy, DeSantis summoned the ghost of Winston Churchill, vowing, "We will fight the woke in education, we will fight the woke in corporations, we will fight the woke in the halls of Congress." (Meanwhile, presidential contender Vivek Ramaswamy made his name writing two books attacking ESG considerations and launching his own anti-ESG investment firm.)

But it's not just DeSantis. This spring, America First Legal, or AFL, a right-wing legal advocacy firm founded by former Trump adviser Stephen Miller, began soliciting aggrieved conservatives for lawsuits against corporations. In a promo released this May, with the look and feel of a late-night injury attorney commercial, Miller asked conservative viewers whether they or their loved ones had been "denied a job, raise, promotion, or professional opportunity as a result of diversity quotas, equity mandates, affirmative action, or other racial preferences." Over the previous few months, AFL had launched a spree of lawsuits and legal threats against various companies. In April, it filed a federal civil rights complaint against Anheuser-Busch, asking the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to investigate whether its diversity programs and scholarships for Black and Latino college students amounted to discrimination against white and Asian people. It filed another against Hershey, charging that the chocolatier's reports on increasing hiring diversity were proof of illegal racial and gender quotas; next came McDonald's, Mars, Unilever, Amazon, Alaska Air, Kroger supermarkets, and more.

In mid-July, a similar argument was picked up by a more substantial force, as 13 state attorneys general sent a letter to Fortune 100 companies, arguing that the Supreme Court's recent ruling ending affirmative action in higher education applied to them, too. Therefore, they argued, corporate diversity programs of all sorts amounted to illegal racial discrimination, and companies that continued using them would face "serious legal consequences."

ESG: The "New Cultural Revolution"

IN SEPTEMBER 2022, at a golf resort in Miami, West Virginia state Treasurer Riley Moore took to the stage of the third National Conservatism conference to explain how to conquer "the threat of woke capitalism." The classroom wars against critical race theory and DEI consuming many attendees, he said, were "just the tip of the proverbial iceberg," and "the cultural manifestation of a larger revolutionary attempt to remake the American economy in ways that would destroy our way of life."

What lay below the surface, Moore suggested, was another three-letter acronym, ESG, and what it stood for was a "silent revolution" the left was waging via "a complex and destructive scheme that aims to fundamentally alter the American energy sector" through divestment from fossil fuels.

As investors began assessing companies not just on their profit margins but on issues like their carbon footprint, diversity stats, or transparency practices—and after the Biden-era Securities and Exchange Commission announced in 2021 that it was creating guidelines for companies to more fully disclose their climate impacts—ESG considerations have become a ubiquitous part of the investment landscape, from individual banks restricting loans for extractive industries to state pension funds managed by ESG-supporting investment companies.

To Moore that meant: "They're using your money to achieve their objectives—objectives that would destroy you." Starting with his state. Whether or not the audience believed in climate change, he said, one thing was "changing for sure, and that is the outcomes of the average American due to the measures being taken to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions." What Moore called the "rich man's problem" of climate change overlooked the "real crisis" in his home state, as West Virginia's employment and life expectancy cratered and its overdose and foster care rates soared.

"These policies are literally killing us," he said, building to a near shout. "This is the cost of the new cultural revolution."

In West Virginia, the state government decided to fight back. After Moore took office, he began hearing from coal and natural gas companies that they would soon lose access to capital because of banks' environmental policies, like not lending to new coal mines or coal-fueled power plants. In response, in 2021, Moore organized a group of 15 state treasurers to write the Biden administration, threatening consequences for imposing ESG "through extra-legal measures," as he put it in Miami. Later that year, the treasurers' group warned a number of large financial institutions that they would stop working with banks that boycott fossil fuels. And in 2022, Moore followed through, placing five institutions—BlackRock, a frequent conservative target; JPMorgan Chase; Goldman Sachs; Wells Fargo; and Morgan Stanley—on a blacklist, terminating their existing state contracts and blocking them from bidding on new ones.

A sixth institution, U.S. Bancorp, caved, and Moore kept it off the list. Subsequently, he said he received "a flood of proposals" from banks around the country, hoping to capitalize on the opportunity. Other states, including Kentucky, Tennessee, and Oklahoma, soon followed suit, joining Texas, which had passed its own anti-ESG law in 2021. In August 2022, Texas made good on that law, releasing a blacklist of more than 300 banks and investment funds. That same month, Ron DeSantis's Florida banned ESG considerations in state pension fund investments—a much larger pot of money. "This," said Moore, who is now running for a U.S. House seat, "is how we win."

By late 2022, *The Washington Post* reported, Consumers' Research—which enjoys an $8 million budget and close ties to prominent right-wing legal strategist Leonard Leo—joined more than a dozen Republican attorneys general in calling for a federal investigation of pro-ESG asset managing giant Vanguard for "meddling with [the] energy industry to achieve progressive political goals at the expense of market efficiency." The group is also a frequent collaborator with, and top donor to, the State Financial Officers Foundation: a nonprofit group of dozens of Republican state treasurers and auditors, including Riley Moore. Around the same time as it launched "Woke Alerts," Consumers' Research also put out a 30-page road map for House Republicans to investigate ESG policies.

This spring and summer, they did exactly that, holding two ESG hearings in the House Oversight Committee in May and June, and a "blitz" of four hearings in the Finance Committee in July, which Kentucky Representative Andy Barr declared "ESG month." At the same time, Barr and Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton proposed a new, cleverly named bill, the Ensuring Sound Governance (ESG) Act, which would require investment managers to obtain written permission from customers before considering nonfinancial interests like the climate in investments. That legislation followed 165 anti-ESG bills introduced in nearly 40 states during the first six months of this year alone, many of them based on Heritage Foundation and American Legislative Exchange Council model legislation.

Only a fraction of those bills passed, but Republicans are trying other avenues as well. After Biden threatened in March to veto a congressional effort to ban companies from considering ESG factors in choosing employees' retirement plans, DeSantis and 18 other Republican governors vowed to "leverage our state pension funds to force change in how major asset managers invest the money of hardworking Americans, ensuring corporations are focused on maximizing shareholder value, rather than the proliferation of woke ideology." A similar argument surfaced in June, when seven Republican attorneys general joined the crusade against Target over its children's Pride collection, warning the company that it might be in breach of state laws protecting children from sexualization, and that it could be committing another, wonkier offense: violating its fiduciary duty to shareholders by making unprofitable decisions that harmed the company.

Stephen Miller's AFL made the same argument, sending a June records demand to Target—on behalf of right-wing think tank the National Center for Public Policy Research, or NCPPR, a Target stockholder—in order to determine whether the company's "radical LGBT political agenda" had "cost the corporation over $12 billion in market valuation." In a statement, Miller said, "For Target to voluntarily and aggressively associate itself with this movement is an act of sabotage against Target shareholders and a destroyer of value.... America First Legal is proud to represent American shareholders financially harmed by Target's descent into gender extremism and child sexual exploitation." (In August, the AFL filed a lawsuit against Target, on behalf of a Florida shareholder, charging that its LGBTQ, DEI, and ESG policies had lost shareholders billions and accusing the company of betraying its customers and investors.)

Also this spring, NCPPR subsidiary the Free Enterprise Project announced a new shareholder action to divest from Walmart, Netflix, and Google parent company Alphabet over a variety of complaints that they supported ESG or other leftist causes. Lamenting that U.S. companies are "picking sides in the most important, vital, and hot-button fights in America," the group's director, Scott Shepard, told One America News Network, "I hope we see some of these left-wing activists disguised as CEOs go to jail."

And in July, on the same day PublicSq. went public, DeSantis directed Florida's State Board of Administration—which oversees the state's public pension fund—to explore legal actions against Anheuser-Busch's parent company for tanking the company's sales by "associat[ing] its Bud Light brand with radical social ideologies."

The Amish Have It Right?

THE IRONY OF all this, said Spencer Ross, a marketing professor at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell who has long studied consumer advocacy, is that while conservatives lambaste companies for "going woke," progressives criticize the same businesses for "woke-washing"—talking a good game while doing little to follow through. Another common critique of ESG is that many large corporations claiming to abide by its principles are still getting rich off oil. In the realm of social issues, part of Bud Light's financial woes is attributable to backlash from progressives, disgusted that Anheuser-Busch so quickly abandoned its defense of trans and queer rights. "A lot of these big corporations have to find somewhere in the middle," said professor Brantley, but if they do, that may also invite opposition, as the country "drift[s] towards more polarized corporate stances."

For years, legacy brands remained neutral, said Ross, but increasingly, "Any decision that gets made, even a business one, is political." (This July, when Farmers Insurance announced it will pull out of Florida, as climate change makes insuring the state

There are practical, non-idealistic reasons, after all, why companies like PayPal avoid businesses like Gab. Likewise, there are bottom-line reasons why companies like Target invest in things like diversity, Jammi added: "because they know they make more money when they are more inclusive. That's just math."

untenable, a member of DeSantis's Cabinet denounced the move as "woke" and warned that legislative hearings may follow.) The move toward not just a bifurcated, but trifurcated economy is already well underway on social media—the parallel economy's first movers—with the abundant right-wing Twitter and YouTube clones now joined by progressive-coded alternatives like Bluesky or Mastodon. "I don't know what the success of any of them will be long term," Ross added. "They may end up being these niche platforms, trying to get the job done. But it also erodes the middle, just like in our politics."

As journalists called historian Glickman last spring seeking comment on Bud Light, he initially predicted it wouldn't last. Recall the 2017 videos of conservatives tossing Keurig coffee makers off balconies for pulling advertising from Sean Hannity, or their boycotting Nike the following year for signing Colin Kaepernick. "Everyone made fun of them, and they went away," Glickman said. But as this year's protests endured, he reassessed. The Bud Light boycott took hold in a way its predecessors hadn't, and corporate America seems "scared in a way they weren't."

"It's a kind of perfect storm of a political moment, where consumer politics is married to this era of deep polarization, of very strong identity politics and a decreasing faith in the idea of free markets," Glickman said. Trump was part of that transformation, never viewing the market with the traditional Republican reverence—or Milton Friedman's doctrine that businesses' only social responsibility is profit—nor imagining it a neutral mediator of price and value. Rather, Trump has seen markets as a blunt instrument to "punish your enemies and reward your friends." Now, Glickman said, that sensibility has spread. Big corporations are no longer seen as inherently virtuous because they're successful, nor emblematic of American freedom; there's a rapidly waning belief in the notion that markets are fair and a growing sense that "everyone needs to put their thumb on the scale, because everyone else is doing it."

How seriously should we take all this? In the 1960s and '70s, Brantley recalled, Black Power activists sought to create a separate market as a form of economic self-determination, but ran into mainstream roadblocks in accessing bank loans and insurance. While today's right claims it is building the superstructure to prevent that, so far that's iffy. A recent study found that Texas's ban on banking with institutions that won't lend to oil and gas companies or certain gun manufacturers may result in the state paying $500 million more in interest to smaller, alternative banks. While Mike Lindell, the conspiracist founder of MyPillow.com, may be an inescapable presence online—with right-wing personalities peppering tweets and podcasts with MyPillow promo codes—his actual business appears to be failing; this summer, Lindell began auctioning off company forklifts and cubicles to make up a $100 million revenue loss, after mainstream retailers dropped him. Lindell's business was "a prime example of the so-called parallel economy," said Nandini Jammi, since he'd had no choice but to shift his marketing model to partnerships with right-wing celebrities. "And he hasn't been able to grow since then."

There are practical, nonidealistic reasons, after all, why companies like PayPal avoid businesses like Gab—because a policy of working with anyone, no matter what they do, brings inherent risk. Likewise, there are bottom-line reasons why companies like Target invest in things like diversity, Jammi added: "because they know they make more money when they are more inclusive. That's just math."

Earlier this year, *Forbes* declared the parallel economy a "mirage," noting that multiple right-wing social media platforms were failing, and that parallel economy job board RedBalloon is primarily notable for its "lack of big-name employers." A *Wired* analysis in April found fewer than 900 active listings on the site, representing one one-hundredth of 1 percent of the volume on ZipRecruiter.com. In 2022, CPAC speakers were abuzz about the parallel economy's promise; this year, though, they spoke more about the "headwinds" they'd encountered, suggesting government intervention might be necessary.

And yet, if the purpose is creating another point of division in an already fractured populace, the parallel economy already has all that it needs: money, lawyers, abundant zeal. Where then does it stop, now that we're already past the point of "red" and "blue" shoes, power bars for and against abortion rights? Will companies be compelled to double down on choosing sides: Ford selling to the left, GM to the right? Or does the parallel economy's ethos of values-based brand identification evolve into endless splintering, with ever more niche ways to opt out?

In recent months, Gab's Andrew Torba, perhaps the foremost popularizer of the concept, signaled as much. After the 2022 midterms failed to deliver a red wave, a disappointed Torba told supporters that electoral politics were a "pipe dream" and the right-wing media weren't "friends," but agents of controlled opposition. The only remaining path forward, he declared, was to "Balkanize and build"; henceforth, Gab would promote parallel economy businesses that could teach their new generation of "pilgrims" skills like homesteading, as they prepared to leave for purer lands, whether in deep red states or online. "The Amish," wrote the one-time Silicon Valley CEO, "have had it right this entire time." TNR

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ILLUSTRATION BY CELINA PEREIRA

Double Vision

Naomi Klein's unnerving journey into the digital "Mirror World"

By Laura Marsh

TORCHING YOUR OWN reputation is usually a onetime engagement. Credibility is finite, and once it's gone, there is not much left to burn. A reporter who got their sources mixed up once will surprise no one next time they bungle a story; a writer who spreads conspiracy theories is soon known as a crank.

Those rules have somehow not held true for the writer Naomi Wolf. A notable feature of her career has been her ability to repeat the act of self-immolation over and over, singeing others along the way. In the first year of the pandemic, Wolf reliably drew fresh surprise and dismay when she made outlandish claims about the tyranny of public health measures and the dangers of vaccines. Each time that she declared, usually via Twitter, that Anthony Fauci was Satan, or that children who wore masks had lost the ability to smile, that the vaccines were a "software platform that can receive uploads," or that she had uncovered a plot by Apple "to deliver vaccines [with] nanopatticles [*sic*] that let you travel back in time," ripples of consternation followed. Was this really the same Naomi Wolf, the author of a widely read feminist treatise, *The Beauty Myth*; a longtime contributor to the liberal newspaper *The Guardian*; a familiar face on MSNBC—a fixture in liberal media since the 1990s? What had happened to her?

These questions proved remarkably durable. The latest Naomi Wolf development was a frequent spectacle on Twitter, and the subject of a steady drip of think pieces. "A MODERN FEMINIST CLASSIC CHANGED MY LIFE. WAS IT ACTUALLY GARBAGE?," Rebecca Onion asked of *The Beauty Myth* in Slate, in March 2021. A few months later, Business Insider documented "NAOMI WOLF'S SLIDE FROM FEMINIST, DEMOCRATIC PARTY ICON TO THE 'CONSPIRACIST WHIRLPOOL,'" and this magazine contemplated "THE MADNESS OF NAOMI WOLF" in June that year, after Twitter suspended her account. The fascination persisted perhaps because Wolf was herself such a rich subject: her claims so haphazardly, deliciously laced with obvious errors and misapprehensions (the nanoparticles story turned out to be based on a conversation she overheard in a restaurant about the Apple Watch); the targets of her outrage so bizarre (as when she tweeted "No! No!!" at a photo of a teddy bear wearing a mask).

Collateral damage in the saga was the writer Naomi *Klein*, who kept getting mistaken for Wolf in the fog of online indignation. People stirred up by Wolf's tweets would start yelling at Klein, wondering what had scrambled *her* political commitments, how the author of *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine*, who had devoted her career to studying the excesses of corporate power, could have come to this. (And perhaps the fact that Klein's reputation was intact perpetuated the sense, essential to a Twitter pile-on, that *someone*'s good name was still at stake.) People were confusing the two Naomis so often that a subset of jokes began to do the rounds: "The real victim in all this here is Naomi Klein," "Thoughts and prayers to Naomi Klein," and so on. Someone even composed a mnemonic that went: "If the Naomi be Klein / you're doing just fine / If the Naomi be Wolf / Oh, buddy. Ooooof."

Klein for her part kept a dignified silence as all this unfolded, limiting herself to the occasional wry comment at moments when "Other Naomi," as she came to think of her, had said something particularly disastrous. She changed her Twitter bio to "not that Naomi," and issued a "periodic reminder to keep your Naomis straight." But privately Klein found the mix-ups more disturbing than she let on. In her new book, *Doppelganger*, she writes of her compulsion to keep an eye on Wolf's antics, at first as a defense mechanism, in order to steel herself for the blowback that was to come, but later out of a strange curiosity. She found herself watching Wolf's appearances on *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, listening to her guest spots on Steve Bannon's podcast, transfixed by the front-facing video Wolf released on *Why Vaccine Passports Equal Slavery Forever*, and searching these appearances for clues. What *had* happened to Naomi Wolf? And what had the public confusion between the two of them—the encroachment of one Naomi on the other—done to Klein's own sense of self?

This story of mistaken identity would on its own be gripping and revealing enough, both as a psychological study and for its explorations of the double in art and history, the disorienting effects of social media, and the queasy feeling of looking into a distorted mirror. But the larger subject of *Doppelganger* turns out to be a far more complex and consequential confusion: Its guiding question is how so many people have in recent years broken with conventional left-right political affiliations and a shared understanding of reality, and crossed over into the "Mirror World," a realm of "uncanny people" and "upside-down politics" where facts are arbitrary and people who still advertise themselves as liberals can make common cause with conspiracists and fascists. The Naomi-Naomi story is more than a generous and capacious reflection on being taken for someone else; it is also the frame for a uniquely astute account of the scrambled political formations that have come out of the pandemic.

A DOPPELGÄNGER IS a double, a person who appears so similar to another that they could easily stand in for them, maybe

GETTY (X3); COURTESY OF KOUROSH KESHIRI/SIMON & SCHUSTER

even take over their life. "The idea that two strangers can be indistinguishable from each other taps into the precariousness at the core of identity," Klein writes. In Philip Roth's novel *Operation Shylock*, a rogue double makes a mockery of Roth's career, mimicking his lifestyle and parodying the themes of his work, to the point that nothing the real Roth can say or do appears authentic or holds a stable meaning. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *How They Met Themselves*, the two young lovers who encounter their doubles in a dark forest simply cannot contemplate these identical copies of themselves: The man draws his sword, the woman faints.

Naomi Wolf does not in fact resemble Naomi Klein in appearance or personality particularly closely, but from the distance of a byline or a Twitter handle, they were, for many readers, similar enough. Both Naomis, Klein notes, are authors of "big-idea books" who started out in the 1990s, Wolf with *The Beauty Myth* in 1990, Klein with *No Logo* in 1999; both have "brown hair that sometimes goes blond from over-highlighting"; both are Jewish. Their name is "just uncommon enough that the first Naomi a person became aware of tended to imprint herself in their mind as a kind of universal Naomi."

Earlier in their careers, mix-ups between the two writers were less common. They had each carved out a distinctive beat, with Wolf on feminism and Klein on corporate exploitation. The problems began, Klein believes, around 2007, when Wolf began to write more broadly on politics, and, at least on the surface, they appeared to be covering similar subjects. Wolf's book *The End of America* focused on elite institutions, as Klein had in *The Shock Doctrine*, though with a very different approach and tone; Klein wrote about the Green New Deal, and so did Wolf, though with added "special conspiracy twists." Klein reported on "the dangers of geoengineering as a response to the climate crisis" around the same time that Wolf was "busily speculating on social media about chemical cloudseeding and covert mass poisonings." Wolf's writing could be read as a funhouse mirror version of Klein's work on concentrated power and its ravages, overlaid with a film of overheated theories and urgent warnings. Telling these two modes apart, however, means recognizing the precision of one versus the hyperbole of the other, seeing the difference between rigorous use of sources versus panicky leaps in logic. It's not hard to imagine how the two versions might easily blur in the mind of a casual reader. Klein is refreshingly, resolutely anti-conspiratorial in her summary of all this. She doesn't see the convergence of her themes and Other Naomi's as remotely intentional, she dryly remarks. "Just deeply unfortunate."

People stirred up by Naomi Wolf's tweets would start yelling at Naomi Klein online, wondering what had scrambled her political commitments.

At first, Klein responded to the mix-ups by trying to ignore them. But as Wolf's rhetoric escalated in 2021, Klein paid closer attention. After Wolf's video on *Why Vaccine Passports Equal Slavery Forever*, she hyped fears of a "CCP-style social credit score system." She appeared "on Fox seven times in less than two months" and became a regular guest on Steve Bannon's podcast *War Room*, weighing in on vaccines at first, but then on all manner of political news. She rallied for Five Freedoms, which she listed as "No Vaccine Passports, No Mask Mandates, No Emergency Law, Open Schools Up 100%," and "Freedom of commerce, worship, petition." And though Klein notes that Wolf is "prone to exaggerating her own influence," she amassed a large, engaged following and "seemingly helped inspire large numbers to take to the streets in rebellion against an almost wholly hallucinated 'tyranny.'"

As much as Klein wanted to keep a distance, she felt pulled into "a quest to understand what messages, secrets, and forebodings" the appearance of her double offered. She began to spend evenings watching everything she "could find about doubles and doppelgangers, from Carl Jung to Ursula K. Le Guin; Fyodor Dostoyevsky to Jordan Peele." And of course she developed an intense psychic and intellectual involvement with Wolf's Twitter presence. Some of the most charming moments in the book are recognizable domestic skirmishes over unhealthy social media use: as when Klein saunters into the kitchen with her laptop, sheepishly asking her husband if she can "just read you this one tweet," or when she swears to give Wolf-watching a break during a family vacation to Prince Edward Island, only to end up furtively bingeing on episodes of *War Room* in her car ("a full-blown relapse into my doppelganger's world"). She develops a level of obsession that might sound like stalking were it not so familiar, were it not in fact the nature—and the entire business model—of social media itself.

It was perhaps also so hard to look away from Other Naomi because of the intense isolation of the period when the confusion reached its crescendo—in a year of stay-at-home orders and social distancing, when platforms like Twitter served as a meager substitute for a richer and wider range of interaction. "Covid had canceled so many of the things that had, for years, told me who I was in the world," Klein writes.

> A planned book tour. A series of lectures. Places where people would come up to me and share what my work meant to them and where I would learn new things from them. I still spoke at all kinds of what we came to call "virtual events." … After each event, I would check Twitter to get any kind of confirmation that I had actually reached other humans. And often I would find only her: her outrageous theories, the confusion, the backlash, the wry jokes.
> The world was disappearing, and so was I.

Klein had plenty of her own thoughts about the pandemic, and in the early months she reported on how tech companies such as

Google and Amazon were profiteering on the crisis, "taking advantage of lockdowns to push a wish list of 'no touch' technologies, rapidly rebranding them as 'Covid-safe.'" Klein foresaw "a grim, AI-enabled vision of a touchless society that would employ far fewer teachers, doctors, and drivers," that would "accept no cash, and have skeletal mass transit." Yet she soon began to see "examples of these same trends being cast in far more conspiratorial ways" by figures who went so far as to suggest "maybe the tech companies had planned the whole thing," or that the virus wasn't even real, and the pandemic itself was an elaborate hoax. She became wary of appearing to fuel any such claims. "I just couldn't figure out how to keep talking about how the large tech firms were exploiting the crisis without it being sucked into the whirring conspiracy mill," Klein writes searchingly. Everything could so easily be turned upside down. "The truth is that I backed off."

We might expect this to be the point in the story when Klein decides it's time to stand up and vigorously defend her own identity. Or as one digital strategy consultant tweeted, "Naomi Klein should sue for trademark dilution and brand harm." But she shrinks from that route, not least because she has long opposed the idea that people should package and market themselves like products; *No Logo* was, she reminds us, "a treatise against the rise of lifestyle branding." And in any case, the more one struggles against one's doppelgänger, insisting, "I *will* reassert myself as the owner of my ideas, my identity, my name!" the more intensely the two are locked together, fused in a struggle to be the main character.

If there is any lesson to be drawn, at least on a personal level, from this "doppelganger trouble," it is, Klein concludes, that "we are not as separate from one another as we might think." The book is in its way a serious effort to bear out that realization, as Klein melds her story willingly with Wolf's for over 300 pages. Throughout there are conscious acts of recognition, instead of outright rejection. She credits the good in Wolf, "a person who clearly loved language, thought deeply about the inner lives of girls and women, and had a vision for their liberation," and even acknowledges that Wolf's success in the 1990s—when Klein, a 20-year-old student, interviewed her for the college newspaper—may have helped her imagine her own future as a writer. Which of them, she wonders, is the double anyway?

THE CASE OF Naomi Wolf, however, is a multipart problem. More puzzling than how anyone could mistake her identity is how she could make the claims that she has made, and how she could ally herself with figures like Tucker Carlson, Steve Bannon, and Donald Trump. There's a story here about the set of forces that guided Wolf specifically toward the conspiratorial fringe, but also a wider story about the swaths of people who have recently made similar journeys. These are the people who over roughly the last five years have *gone off the deep end*, as it were. "Almost everyone I talk to tells me about people they have lost 'down the rabbit hole,'" Klein reports, "parents, siblings, best friends, as well as formerly trusted intellectuals and commentators."

People who could once be expected to trust the same institutions and espouse similar values may now differ vastly. Klein recounts the bewildering experience of canvassing door to door in the district where her husband was running for office in British Columbia. She is hopeful when she approaches a house with solar panels on the roof and an electric car in the driveway. But nothing goes as expected. Although the woman who opens the door has long voted for the socialist New Democratic Party, she has soured on the party, which she believes has been taken over by "the globalists," and she is not open to any further discussion. At another house, a woman in yoga pants riffs on "bodily autonomy" and "sovereign citizenship" and her "strong immune system"—all the reasons she opposes vaccines. When Klein's husband politely reminds her of the dangers that immune-compromised people face in unvaccinated communities, she simply states, "I think those people *should* die."

Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World
by Naomi Klein
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 416 pp., $30.00

To be sure, these encounters are jarring on an interpersonal level. "People who were familiar" have "somehow become alien, leaving us with that unsettled, uncanny feeling," Klein observes. But they're also difficult to make sense of politically, seeming to defy traditional forms of left-right identification. One of the strengths of Klein's book is the clarity with which she traces the composition of the "strange-bedfellow coalitions" that have coalesced since the pandemic, encompassing the traditional right and the conspiratorial hard right, as well as "alternative health subcultures usually associated with the green left," parents who are angry about school closures (and a range of other culture war issues), and small-business owners badly affected by lockdowns. What is happening here is not a process of political conversion, with onetime leftists defecting to the right—as, say, members of the Old Left did in the 1960s and 1970s to help found the neoconservative movement. Figures like Wolf continue to claim the mantle of liberalism and feminism even as they align with Bannon and Trump and claim that their peers are the ones who have betrayed those commitments; they present their so-called political homelessness as a sign of their integrity.

Borrowing from the scholars William Callison and Quinn Slobodian, Klein calls these new formations "diagonalist"—a term that describes the forging of coalitions that cross traditional left-right divides in unexpected ways. Diagonalists, Callison and Slobodian write,

> tend to contest conventional monikers of left and right (while generally arcing toward far-right beliefs), to express ambivalence if not cynicism toward parliamentary politics, and to blend convictions about holism and even spirituality with a dogged discourse of individual liberties. At the extreme end, diagonal movements share a conviction that all power is conspiracy.

The unlikeliness of the alliance is an important element of diagonalism. This is why, Klein points out, Tucker Carlson tells Wolf with an air of self-flattery, "I never thought I would be talking to you except in a debate format." And why Wolf takes pride in telling Bannon: "I spent years thinking you were the devil, no disrespect." These coy performances of open-mindedness

imply that they've been thrust together by the unreasonableness of their former comrades, united in a more urgent cause than anyone in mainstream politics is willing to recognize. In such performances, they can imagine themselves reaching magnanimously across the aisle, in contrast to a cancel culture and purity test–obsessed left.

For all the cries of "what happened to Naomi Wolf?" the forces that ushered her into this ghoulish lineup are not difficult to identify. Wolf had suffered a series of public humiliations in the years leading up to the pandemic. She had toyed with a number of conspiracies—such as that the filmed killings of Western captives by the Islamic State were a hoax; that the U.S. government had a plan to spread Ebola in order to justify tyrannical lockdowns—but none had really stuck. She had stumbled into errors, which had been exposed in a devastatingly public manner—the worst case being when a BBC interviewer revealed that a central claim in her book *Outrages* rested on her misunderstanding of court records, and her publisher pulped the book in 2019. Wolf had lost her traditional audience; there was no longer a place for her in the market for reputable books about big ideas. Exile gave her every incentive to press further into the world of conspiracies, where her banishment from the liberal media became a badge of honor, and when the pandemic hit, she struck gold. Wolf didn't "lose it," Klein points out; on the other side of humiliation, she quickly found a huge and accepting—even adoring—audience.

If a combination of Very Online mishaps and career potholes made Wolf a diagonalist, the forces that forged the larger diagonalist coalition are more consequential. The pandemic arrived in 2020 atop a series of "other long-repressed emergencies," from climate crisis to soaring levels of inequality to mass incarceration to the increasingly extortionate and exploitative nature of a threadbare, private health care system. In the neoliberal era, individuals are forced to assume sole responsibility for navigating "every hardship and every difficulty—from poverty to student debt to home eviction to drug addiction." When the pandemic exacerbated these hardships, it was an uphill battle to build solidarity and convince people to support collective solutions. After a lifetime of being told they were on their own, "a subset of the population" doubled down on individualism. It does not, now, seem surprising to Klein that they essentially said, *"Fuck you: we won't mask or jab or stay home to protect people we have already chosen not to see."* Nor that they went looking for pundits and political leaders who reinforced their worldview.

Among that subset, Klein noticed, people who worked broadly in wellness or physical fitness featured prominently:

At Voodoo Lounge

by Rickey Laurentiis

You have to really trust someone to let them all
in your mouth. Like Calypso. It's a short step from there
  to the false belief that only by the suppression of
the erotic, Lorde lectures, within our lives, Lorde begs, and consciousness
  can Bodies be truly strong. But what's Strength speech
to Character? What of Romance? Where do it lay if I play weak,
my back broken in, and *like* it? I like my sadnesses
Glad. I like the power these cheeks
  make impressionable on a scene turn Rigid as he pulls
My hand to his made-lonely Manhood at Voodoo Lounge, fourth red seat
  from the back, at North Rampart between Saint Peter
and Orleans streets, smart man. What of Conquest? So I like that suede way
My silhouette kill 'em, these symptomatic men, like
  the New Heat pandemic; them hungry, fish-on-the-line, who Lean
& like to Swagger by the pressure I'm rebuilding in their Eyes,
  what makes melt men run clean up on me shouting my worth
& I receive it. Kiss me like I'm the Last Woman on Earth!

Rickey Laurentiis *is a poet in New Orleans and author of* Boy With Thorn.

"trainers, yoga teachers, CrossFit instructors, masseuses, mixed martial artists, chiropractors, lactation consultants, doulas, nutritionists, herbalists, menopause coaches, and certified juice therapists" had a tendency to cross into the Mirror World. Like the woman in the yoga pants who thought immune-compromised people should die, people enmeshed in wellness culture were apt to morph into anti-vaccine and anti-mask influencers. The Center for Countering Digital Hate's "Disinformation Dozen"—a list of the 12 people responsible for nearly two-thirds of all bogus claims about Covid and vaccines—included a chiropractor, three different osteopaths, and the blogger behind Health Nut News. (One might also look at Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who has spoken of "vaccine Nazis" and used to own a CrossFit gym.)

Many wellness workers were hit hard by stay-at-home orders and social distancing recommendations because their jobs required in-person contact. But, as Klein argues, the underlying tenets of wellness culture also set the stage for a paranoid individualism: Neoliberal wellness culture's message "that individuals must take charge over their own bodies as their primary sites of influence, control, and competitive edge" and "that those who don't exercise that control deserve what they get" has turned out to be "all too compatible with far-right notions of natural hierarchies, genetic superiority, and disposable people."

A collection of resentments and fears isn't enough on its own to solidify a political formation. Instead, as Klein traces, the right actively courted people who felt newly angry and abandoned in 2020. On *War Room*, Bannon marveled at "all these moms who are listening to Naomi Wolf." He made her a regular on his show, sensing, Klein writes, that there was political power to be gained by appealing to "pissed-off, mostly white suburban moms—nerves frayed from those years of yo-yo remote schooling and closed gyms … done being dismissed and mocked as 'Karens' by mean liberals." For all the preposterousness of so many of Wolf's public statements, the influence she exerted was real. Meanwhile, the liberal journalists who thought they were watching a meltdown every time she tweeted focused, perhaps too much, on how she had embarrassed herself, or had traduced us, the once-appreciative readers of *The Beauty Myth*, and not enough on the new friendships she was making.

The focus of *Doppelganger* is not an individual but, as in Klein's other books, a system that fractures society and drives people apart.

***DOPPELGANGER* COULD HAVE** followed the contours of so many stories of doubles and stolen identities and evil twins, in which the goal is chiefly to unmask the impostor; with the doppelgänger vanquished, order is restored, and all is well again. Klein is clear that this story is not that simple: Even if we could banish misinformation, we would still be left with a series of social, political, and environmental crises that have gone largely unaddressed in government—hardly a vision of equilibrium. A major reason why the distortions and evasions of the Mirror World have appealed to so many people is that the baseline of political health in the United States today is so very low.

"Doppelganger stories are never only about *them,*" Klein writes. "They are always also about *us*." She questions whether those of us on this side of the mirror have done enough to present a thoroughgoing plan to address these crises, and to win support for that plan among people who are feeling the effects in direct and indirect ways. "And does that plan feel credible, rooted in action—or does it seem like more blah, blah, blah?" For, while liberal politicians might gladly pose for photos at protests or profess their commitment to equality, they have a long track record of broken promises: of "using words as intended, yet with no intention of acting on them." The right, meanwhile, does have a plan, or at least a series of calls to action that, histrionic and facile as they might seem, resemble a plan: "The plan is to push 'Five Freedoms' and 'no mask' laws wherever you live. The plan is to barge into your local school board meeting, accuse its members of being Nazis, and get elected to take their place.… The plan is to get you to send them money, to join their wars," Klein recaps.

A frequent refrain on *War Room* is "Action! Action! Action!" Even though many of the pleasures of *Doppelganger* lie in its psychological acuity, the book is not content to be a meditation on doubleness; the only way to get out of the Mirror World is to *do things*. If figures like Bannon and Wolf are selling self-righteous individualism, the left must work on bringing people together and building solidarity. Attempts to take collective action—"to unionize our workplaces, or halt evictions, or free political prisoners, or build alternatives to policing, or stop a pipeline, or get an insurgent candidate elected"—won't dissolve deep divisions in society, but they do help to balance them with "the recognition of shared interests" and, sometimes, the rush of shared power.

The focus of *Doppelganger* is not an individual but, as in the expansive visions of Klein's other books, a system that fractures society and drives people apart. This framing is the least unkind and least self-obsessed way possible to approach a book about seeing a portion of your public persona swept away in someone else's career maelstrom. And yet it's hard to imagine this work without the bizarrely distinctive figure of Naomi Wolf at the center of it: not only because of the perverse flair she has shown for invention and self-reinvention, but because we see her here at a moment of transformation that is now almost complete, and will be crucial to understanding where the politics she represents are heading. She is no longer really a warped reflection of the liberal media or its values, and, as the diagonalist formation solidifies, she is less obviously a double of Naomi Klein or anyone else. I would be surprised if anyone mistakes one for the other in future. TNR

Laura Marsh *is the literary editor of* The New Republic.

The Protest Puzzle

The demonstrations of the last decade were vast and explosive—and surprisingly ineffective.

By Osita Nwanevu

THOUGH HIS NAME wouldn't ring a bell to most in this country, Mohamed Bouazizi was, without question, among the most influential individuals of our century thus far. The millions he unintentionally inspired teetered and toppled governments beginning with his own; in doing so, they rattled the global order and altered the course of politics even here in the United States, where many who never learned his name nonetheless know of him—the Tunisian produce vendor who, bullied one time too many by local police, went into the street just shy of noon on a mid-December day in 2010, doused himself in paint thinner, struck a match, and lit the world on fire.

That, at any rate, is how most popular accounts of the origins of the "Arab Spring" go. Even in the early days of the uprisings, that phrase seemed to understate the significance of what had begun in

Above: protests in Tunis in 2011, sparked by the death of Mohamed Bouazizi

ALEX MAJOLI/MAGNUM

Tunisia. The wave of protests that Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked would reach far beyond the Middle East in a matter of weeks—the following February, the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* would reference the protests in Tunisia and the subsequent demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in its fateful call for "A MILLION MAN MARCH ON WALL STREET"—and temporally, that "spring" of technologically facilitated mass action has lasted more than 12 years and counting now.

In Tunisia itself, protests have continued. While the de facto dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of the country and his office less than a month after Bouazizi's death, the nation's political tumults in the time since have both fueled and been fueled by the public's still potent sociopolitical and economic discontent. In 2021, Kais Saied, the country's sixth president since 2011, dismissed Parliament and began ruling by decree in response to demonstrations against his government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic; throughout this year, Tunisians have been taking to the streets yet again to protest Saied's further consolidation of power in the time since. "In two years," Samira Chaouachi, vice president of Tunisia's Parliament, lamented in July, "he has destroyed all the institutions and democratic gains of the revolution."

While the revolution is still commemorated each year in Tunisia, the optimism that took hold of the country in the wake of Ben Ali's fall has withered. And in his new book, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution*, the journalist Vincent Bevins writes that Mohamed Bouazizi's name is not only remembered but cursed in the very town that had once given him a hero's burial. "Most people hate him," a teen flatly informs Bevins near Bouazizi's grave. Another local assessed Bouazizi more kindly, but with regret for all he had wrought. "I knew him," he said. "He was a nice guy. But this revolution did not benefit the Tunisian people. Tunisia did not take one step forwards. It moved backwards."

Of the 10 places that Bevins examines in his account of the most disruptive mass protest movements of the last decade or so—Bahrain, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Hong Kong, South Korea, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yemen—the same might be said of six more of them, Bevins contends. Repression has arguably deepened in Bahrain, Egypt, and Hong Kong. Brazil and Turkey both saw right-wing authoritarians come to power. And the events following the ouster of Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012 led to an ongoing civil war that has killed nearly 400,000 people thus far and produced what remains one of the world's most acute humanitarian crises—at last count by the United Nations Population Fund, some 21.6 million Yemenis are thought to need basic aid and assistance of some kind today.

If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution
by Vincent Bevins
PublicAffairs, 352 pp., $30.00

The age of mass protest ushered in by the Arab Spring is hardly over, but that record of failures, setbacks, and cataclysms has been dispiriting even to many of the agitators and demonstrators who shaped the movements in question and whom Bevins has spent the last 10 years or so following and interviewing in search of answers. "The point was not just to notice that the mass protest decade hasn't really worked out," he muses toward the end of the book. "The idea was to understand why." Fortunately, he comes away from his globe-trotting search with critical lessons for activists both here and abroad. Setting the world afire, it turns out, is easier than one might expect. Tending to the flames is harder.

MOST CRITIQUES OF contemporary mass protest focus on the roles that technology and social media in particular have played in pulling demonstrations together. Facebook and Twitter brought thousands to Cairo's Tahrir Square, yes, but also, as prominent critics like sociologist Zeynep Tufekci have argued, those same mechanisms may have ensured that the movements they sparked wouldn't endure for long. Digital coordination, Bevins writes, allows for "the existence of big protests that come together very quickly—so quickly, perhaps, that no one knows each other, people are trying to realize contradictory goals, and after the initial energy fades, nothing remains." The initial energies social media loosed in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere were real and explosive—governments did shake, and regimes did fall. The question at the heart of the mass protest decade isn't why social media–driven uprisings failed to change conditions where they happened, but why the changes forced by those uprisings—even at their most potent and least ephemeral—were either limited in scope or reversed, remarkably often, by leaders worse than the ones activists did manage to topple.

To the extent that social media dynamics provide some answers, they have less to do with slacktivism and the shallowness of much of the political engagement on the platforms than with the concrete and rather predictable patterns of real-world action the platforms catalyzed. Throughout the book, Bevins traces a particular repertoire of tactics that reappeared again and again across the globe after those initial uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Calls would be issued on social media to march and occupy public spaces en masse. Just about everywhere, demonstrators planned for confrontations with the police and the destruction of property rather than boycotts and strikes. And outrage about the inevitable crackdowns from state authorities—as captured by harrowing pictures and videos posted to social media—would be harnessed to bring about still larger and louder demonstrations.

In seven of the 10 places that Bevins studies—Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, Ukraine, Hong Kong, and Chile—viral images of state repression intensified the protests. Whether violence took the form of police brutality or a crackdown, "the crucial spark consisted of visible repression against a particular type of citizen, against someone who was not supposed to be hurt, or be murdered." In Ukraine's Maidan Revolution in 2014, for instance, it was brutality against students that brought the masses into the streets, Bevins explains; in Turkey, many were incensed into action by the pepper-spraying of a woman in an instantly iconic red dress.

"Social media firms made it much easier to scale up the size of horizontal mass gatherings," Bevins writes, "and their services also made it very likely that citizens would see disturbing imagery of states

The Tunisian army barricaded the Parliament building amid a constitutional crisis in 2021.

abusing their power." But as reliably appalling as police crackdowns against mass demonstrations are, Bevins contends that their role in inspiring further action prevented the movements he surveyed from developing conceptual roots as deep as the problems they hoped to confront—outrage at the state's violence rarely yielded to coherent shared analyses of the social, economic, and political conditions upholding the state. "It is far from clear that the most visible and affecting power dynamics are the most important ones in a complex society," he writes. Instances of overt state repression may be indicative of what ails a society more broadly, but movements galvanized by them, Bevins suggests, often wind up ideologically underdeveloped, easy to appease, or vulnerable to capture.

In Brazil in the spring of 2013, for instance, demonstrations in support of free public transit rapidly ballooned into a seemingly all-encompassing and functionally leaderless protest movement, after images of a violent military police crackdown against protesters went viral. Eventually, more than one million people nationwide took to the streets in opposition to what had been a popular left-leaning government. Not long after the protests began to swell, a YouTube video in support of them—purportedly from the collective Anonymous—also picked up traction on social media. "There was a man in that V for Vendetta mask sitting at a desk," Bevins writes. "There were some static visual effects, as if the group had infiltrated your computer. Then you hear a male voice, distorted by another cheap video editing tool."

The voice issued a call for demonstrators to focus on potentially unifying demands "with no ideological or religious content" and listed "5 *causas*" worthy of their attention, including the designation of congressional corruption as a "heinous crime," investigations into the mishandling of World Cup projects, and opposition to a constitutional amendment establishing the police's sole jurisdiction on criminal investigations. "Notably," Bevins observes, "none of these demands would lead to concrete, direct benefits for regular people—they were all judicial adjustments or dealt with elite politics—and did not address economic justice at all."

Nevertheless, the video took the protest movement by storm; almost immediately, 5 CAUSAS could be seen on signs carried by demonstrators around the country. And before long, in an attempt to placate them, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff made what seemed like an overt nod to the causes with her "Five Pacts"—a slate of proposals that included the "heinous crime" designation and the shutting down of the planned constitutional amendment named in the video. Congress quickly acted upon both ideas. Bevins managed to find the person responsible for the 5 *causas* video—a man who went only by Mario and who had never actually linked up with Anonymous. He'd simply donned a V for Vendetta mask and hit "record." "What about the five causes?" Bevins asked. "How did the group decide on those? 'Oh, no one decided,' he responded. He had simply made them up. He pieced the 'causes' together from stuff he had read on Facebook and came up with a list. Five seemed like a good number."

PERHAPS UNSURPRISINGLY, THE protests in Brazil began to dissipate not long after Rousseff and other officials offered the pacts and other moderate concessions—though the vague populist energies that fueled them would be captured, again and again, in later protests surrounding the political crises that toppled Rousseff and eventually led to the election of far-right demagogue Jair Bolsonaro. The *causas* episode captures well what gradually emerges as Bevins's central theme. There is both power and peril in leaderless mass action. And the leaderlessness that spontaneous, social media–driven protest lends itself to was adopted as an outright virtue too readily in too many places, Bevins argues, thanks to an intellectual lineage that stretches back to the New Left movements in the United States, France, and elsewhere in the late 1960s.

The organizational approach of America's Students for a Democratic Society, which had positioned itself against the centralized, authoritarian politics of Soviet communism, for instance, "dictated that they should adopt organizational forms now that they would like to see in the world they wanted to create," Bevins writes. "The name given to this was 'prefigurative politics'—what you are doing now will prefigure, or show a glimpse of, the world you want to live in tomorrow." And the anti-authoritarian activists in the New Left movements trained themselves to create new spaces for prefiguration through a now familiar set of tactics. The now legendary anti-establishment protests that swept France in May 1968 featured the deployment of techniques like "escalation-provocation," Bevins explains, "in which committed militants would fight cops or fascists and invite spectacular repression" and the sympathies of observers ahead of more peaceful demonstrations. Another frequently used technique was "the occupation," the practice of taking over important buildings and areas, which was "used in Paris as it was in California" to give rise to "new

YASSINE MAHJOUB/AFP/GETTY

forms of life … behind the barricades and in occupied spaces."

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the spirit and tactics of the New Left would be revived, despite a rather mixed record of success, by the alter-globalization movement against the new world trade order of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and would be promoted by influential figures like the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber. "This is a movement about reinventing democracy," he wrote in a 2002 essay:

> It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations.

Those ideas spread globally among activists and groups that would spring into action with renewed energy in the wake of the Arab Spring. During Occupy Wall Street in the United States, Graeber himself would rise to prominence as one of the movement's key organizers and theorists. But the politics of leaderlessness and prefiguration have long had radical critics, here and abroad. More than half a century ago now, as Bevins notes, the feminist activist Jo Freeman laid out a basic but still potent critique in her essay "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," which might just as well have been called "The Illusion of Structurelessness." Even in putatively leaderless organizations and movements, she argued, leaders—powerful cliques and charismatic figures—are sure to emerge, and perhaps without the transparency, accountability, and democratic feedback that would be available to activists under more hierarchical conditions. When no one is in charge, put more simply, the odds are alarmingly high that some random in a V for Vendetta mask will step up to the plate.

And the concept of prefiguration, for its part, freights radical movements—sometimes for better, often for worse—with deep obligations beyond the already difficult tasks of winning and securing power, holding themselves to standards that state actors and other powerful opponents don't have to meet. Graeber, Bevins writes, acknowledged specifically that leaderlessness and anti-hierarchical organizational structures would be poorly suited to revolutionary movements in wartime. "But the problem, at least in the mass protest decade, is that if you are actually successful, someone is going to declare war on you," Bevins writes. "This might be political warfare, or it might be literal, violent war. If you score any kind of political victory, there is likely going to be someone who feels they will lose, and these people usually go on the attack—and have no philosophical objections to using hierarchy, formal organization, and 'authoritarian' internal command structures."

If the tactics and habits of mind adopted internationally by the activists whom Bevins followed closely over the last decade, mostly in the Middle East and

Distortions on Donne V and XXII

by Charles Bardes

In 1623, at the age of 51, the poet John Donne fell gravely ill and struggled near death for several weeks. It was during and immediately after this period that he wrote his Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, *a set of 23 essays that narrate his illness and recovery.*

The "Distortions on Donne" seize or usurp passages from the prose Devotions *and render them in verse.*

Meditation V: solus adest

As sickness is the greatest
misery so the greatest misery
of sickness is
solitude
when
the infectiousness of the disease
deters them who should assist
even the physician dares
scarce come a torment
not threatened in hell it self

Meditation XXII: metusque, relabi

Nay, compassion it self comes
to no great degree, if we have not felt
in some proportion, in our selves,
that which we lament and condole
in another

Charles Bardes, *a physician, is the author of* Diary of Our Fatal Illness.

The age of mass protest ushered in by the Arab Spring is hardly over, but the record of failures, setbacks, and cataclysms has been dispiriting.

Latin America, have been poor fits for their respective movements, it seems potentially relevant, as he observes, that "repertoires and philosophical approaches" to protest "usually flowed from north to south, not the other way around." "Several people told me they believed their movements had unconsciously taken on positions developed in the First World," he writes, "that may not be so applicable in the Global South."

> One Egyptian revolutionary put it to me this way: "In New York or Paris, if you do a horizontal, leaderless, and post-ideological uprising, and it doesn't work out, you just get a media or academic career afterward. Out here in the real world, if a revolution fails, all your friends go to jail or end up dead."

"I SPENT YEARS doing interviews," Bevins eventually concludes, "and not one person told me that they had become more horizontalist, or more anarchist, or more in favor of spontaneity and structurelessness." Instead, the activists he spoke to, across disparate movements motivated and shaped by different grievances and conditions across the globe, offered up a loose consensus, more supportive of formal structures and leadership in mass movements—or of, at the very least, having a stable contingent of activists ready to represent them and articulate ideologically informed demands. "We thought representation was elitism," one Egyptian activist told him, "but actually it is the essence of democracy."

Bevins habitually labels that preference for structure "Leninism," as though one has to be a student of the Russian Revolution to appreciate the utility of having someone lead or speak for a group. "Because the ruling class had a lot more means at its disposal to propagate its ideology," he writes of Lenin's thought, "the revolutionary movement would need to be guided by a coherent ideology of its own."

Lenin aside, this is all rather commonsensical—or at least it ought to have been for the movements surveyed. Change is best pursued with a particular tactical or ideological direction in mind, clearly; without a designated leader or group of leaders to set that direction—a "vanguard," if one prefers—one cannot predict the direction a movement will ultimately take, or what ideas and actors might prevail in the aftermath of a movement toppling the existing political order. Gains made are easily reversed. And, as was the case so disappointingly often over the last decade in protest, conditions can devolve to a point worse than the state of affairs that drove people into the streets in the first place.

"The particular repertoire of contention that became very common, almost appearing to be natural, from 2010 to 2020—apparently spontaneous, digitally coordinated, horizontally organized, leaderless mass protests—did a very good job of blowing holes in social structures and creating political vacuums," Bevins writes. "There's a reason we so often call them 'explosions.'" But the movements that created those vacuums were only rarely prepared to fill them:

> As a very simple rubric for understanding the outcome in each country, we just have to look at who was ready and waiting to rush in. In Egypt, it was the military. In Bahrain, it was Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council, who literally marched in to fill in the gaps. In Kyiv, it was a different set of oligarchs, and well-organized militant nationalists found a little bit of space that they could occupy too. In Turkey it was ultimately Erdoğan himself, though he took up more space than a leader should in a democratic country that hopes to enjoy global prestige and the support of cultural elites in Istanbul. In Hong Kong it was Beijing. In Brazil, Dilma Rousseff was not removed, not immediately; but to the extent that she lost influence in June 2013, that power did not fall to the anti-authoritarian left, as the Movimento Passe Livre would have liked.

Given the risk that the wrong people win out in the end, Bevins counsels sobriety. "If you cannot carry out a revolution and are not in a position to negotiate reforms, then perhaps it is acceptable to do nothing at all," he cautions. "Better yet, to organize, analyze, and strategize—to put yourself in the best position for the next opportunity. Sometimes, the right action may be to wait. At the least, recent history suggests you should not try to effect maximum disruption at any moment that this appears possible."

That's an insight that might be applied as readily here as anywhere else. While we've seen more than our share of demonstrations in this country over the last decade, the movements behind them have had a mostly salutary but mostly diffuse impact on our politics. Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter fundamentally altered debates about economic inequality and racial justice. The discursive shifts those movements brought about have manifested themselves in actual policy; those and other protest movements have moreover trained and elevated a generation of progressive leaders who have made an impact as both activists and practitioners of formal politics.

But the institutions underpinning our politics and our economy have survived the decade mostly unchanged and unscathed; in general, we have about as many reasons to hit the streets now as we did 10 years ago. And when we do, we ought to take more than mere inspiration from movements abroad—it's their failures that we might learn the most from. TNR

Osita Nwanevu *is a contributing editor at* The New Republic.

Funny Money

How did crypto CEOs manage to swindle so many people?

By Jacob Bacharach

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

PHOTO REFERENCE: BLOOMBERG/GETTY (X3)

IN HIS MONUMENTAL history *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, the anthropologist David Graeber accused economists of inventing "imaginary villages" as the settings for their just-so stories about the ancient origins of financial exchange. Five thousand years later, it is hard not to apply the same phrase to the strange world of cryptocurrency, a skein of imaginary communities and exchanges that claimed to be reinventing trade and commerce from first principles even as, in reality, they reinvented forms of fraud and exploitation that are almost as old as money itself. Money, Groucho Marx supposedly observed, can't buy happiness, but it does let you choose your own form of misery. And fake money? All the more so.

Until recently, crypto fantasies were all but impossible to avoid. In the churn of shiny-object internet and technology fads, it feels like barely yesterday when every celeb in the United States was hawking crypto at the Super Bowl and NFTs on late night. The precise consumer purpose of crypto was never entirely clear—it was sold as something halfway between the stock market and online sports books—but celebrity spokespeople from Matt Damon to Larry David to Spike Lee promised that it represented the *future*, a vague country where banks and credit card companies and 10-year cycles of recession and 401(k) devaluation were as obsolete as the horse and buggy. Well, no one likes bank fees, and everyone hopes fortune will favor their boldness. Fear of missing out is a powerful economic motivator, which bland theories of rational individual economic actors do not capture.

Then FTX, once one of the most prominent crypto exchanges, collapsed spectacularly; the celebs got sued; and the regulatory bodies overseeing the world's real capital markets suddenly saw fit to start poking around. In mid-June, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and the major international cryptocurrency exchange Binance came to a court-mediated deal. The SEC had sought to force Binance to pay millions in restitution to customers that it had allegedly defrauded and to permanently enjoin the company's founder, Changpeng Zhao (better known as CZ), from acting as a corporate director in the United States. Under the mediation deal, Binance's U.S. arm would be permitted to continue limited operations, principally to allow U.S. customers to withdraw assets, but the company could not seamlessly transfer and intermingle funds and

assets from the United States to its various offshore operations. That, it turns out, was the whole game.

The SEC suit follows a separate action from the Commodities Futures Trading Commission that seeks, among other things, to permanently bar CZ from ever again engaging in any activity that falls under CFTC jurisdiction. It is likely to succeed in doing just that, and Binance's days of access to the North American market are almost certainly numbered. EU regulators are circling as well, particularly in France—the exchange maintains one of its major global offices in Paris—where Binance and CZ are accused of false advertising and failing anti–money laundering obligations. Well, there is always Kazakhstan.

Enthusiasts and investors have meanwhile found other fads to glom onto (the metaverse! AI!). When God bursts a bubble, he blows up a new one. Crypto still exists; the blockchain is still out there, endlessly searching for a use case; but the music is slowing, even if it has not yet entirely stopped.

In the mere 14 years since the first bitcoin was minted (mined?), the industry has created and destroyed astonishing digital fortunes, and it has destroyed many real nest eggs and retirements and lives as well. What happened? How did it grow so big, so fast? Why was it so lightly regulated for so long? Why was it so *attractive* to certain personality types and certain political ideologies? And maybe most interestingly, *who were they*, the guys at the top who took their many victims' real money, washed it through their online exchanges, and turned it into real money and real assets to enrich themselves? How did they take so many people in?

THESE ARE THE questions that Ben McKenzie and co-author Jacob Silverman try to answer in *Easy Money: Cryptocurrency, Casino Capitalism, and the Golden Age of Fraud*. Part Vox-ish explainer, part globe-trotting picaresque, it follows McKenzie, an actor-turned-crypto critic, and Silverman, an indefatigable journalist, as they journey from SXSW stages to Miami confabs to Caribbean islands in search of some kind of *there* there to crypto—finding behind every door another door, as they try to unravel the nebulous and seemingly infinitely malleable schemes that kept the industry afloat as long as there were more new suckers to feed into its engine.

It's an entertaining, if often depressing, read. Crypto is a wildly diffuse industry with wildly diffuse and often contradictory underpinnings, use cases, and economic justifications: what McKenzie and Silverman call "the economic narrative that developed around it, a constellation of sometimes overlapping stories that built up over the course of its existence." The "blockchain," the indelible digital ledger that forms the backbone of crypto transactions and accounting, was theorized in the early 1980s, and attempts at digital currency date from the '90s. Likewise, microtransactions and the trading of digital assets have been around since the 1990s in multiplayer gaming, with gamers using both in-game assets and real-world currencies to purchase or trade for weapons, tools, character skins, and more.

It was in the late 2000s and early 2010s, in the shadow of the spectacular collapse of financial markets and institutions in the Great Recession and the decision of governments and central banks to bail them out, that Bitcoin launched and inaugurated the era of modern cryptocurrency. And as *Easy Money* is at pains to point out with charming bluntness, Bitcoin and its imitators *did* have a compelling narrative: "The original story—that Bitcoin represents a response to the devastating failures of the traditional financial system—holds significant power because we all agree on its premise: Our current financial system sucks."

But as the authors make clear, the shadow financial ecosystem that sprouted around Bitcoin, its imitators, and its many descendants, rapidly came to imitate the worst aspects of traditional finance with none of the advantages of state backing and state regulation. Far from providing an alternative to regular currencies, a stable medium of exchange that could be almost universally traded for goods and services, crypto coins, or tokens, behaved more like stocks, whose value rose and fell on the basis of financial speculation, although, unlike regular stocks, coins conveyed no ownership of anything, no *equity*, and were not even loosely tied to an underlying business activity or real-world asset. Their value was entirely notional.

Easy Money
by Ben McKenzie and Jacob Silverman
Harry N. Abrams, 304 pp., $28.00

As long as a sufficient number of new investors bought in with real money, however, the paper value of their now purely digital holdings went up, and the whole system ran like a money-printing press. Crypto had low barriers to entry, few transaction fees, and much of it was opaque to taxing authorities. It required little more than an internet connection, and with that, anyone could remake himself (there were women in crypto, of course, but it was and remains an intensely male space) as a miniature Warren Buffett. It had, in other words, all the characteristics of a Ponzi scheme or a multilevel marketing scam.

And likewise, far from creating a decentralized, democratized currency and economy, the crypto world arrogated much of its wealth and influence to just a few firms and figures. McKenzie has a professional actor's nose for character, a sense of those few foibles of speech, physical habits, manners of self-presentation that make a person a *guy*. (The book's explainer-style interludes on the structure and history of global finance are somewhat less successful, alternating between high-level gloss and the forced jocularity of a cool substitute teacher.) There are "Charles and Paul," two guys the co-authors originally meet and get drunk with at South by Southwest, who claim to be CIA agents looking to recruit in the crypto space, although neither seems to know anything at all about crypto. There is Alex Mashinsky, an Israeli serial entrepreneur notable for his time as CEO of the now-bankrupt crypto lending platform, Celsius, who waves off his own PR minders to casually tell McKenzie that no more than 15 percent of crypto assets have real-world exchange value, and the rest is pure speculation. (Mashinsky has since been arrested and charged with multiple counts of fraud and securities crimes.)

And of course, there is Sam Bankman-Fried, who grants the McKenzie-Silverman duo what, in other circumstances, might be described as "unprecedented access," but which, for the shambolic, Adderall-popping paper zillionaire, seemed more or less par for the course: DMing the pair out of the

blue and eventually agreeing to sit for a recorded interview, during which he sent his own minder out of the room.

This interview, conducted before FTX collapsed, before it was revealed that SBF and his accomplices were stealing their own clients' money to make huge bets via their affiliated hedge fund, when outlets like *Fortune* were still credulously wondering if he was the "next Warren Buffett," is an extraordinary text of an extraordinary age. While other interlocutors in the tech and financial press were embarrassingly eager to burnish SBF's boy-genius reputation and to prematurely hail him as the man who could turn crypto into a respectable and mainstream financial instrument, McKenzie, by now experienced at playing the open-minded naïf, lets him bluster through a catastrophic conversation, bluffing his way through a series of straightforward questions about his business like a hungover flop with a lie-stuffed résumé at the worst job interview in the history of capitalism.

"Is Solana safe?" McKenzie asks, when SBF approvingly cited the troubled, frequently hacked exchange (an exchange in which, of course, Alameda Research, FTX's sister trading firm, held an enormous stake). "So the basic answer," Bankman-Fried replies, "is it depends on what you mean by safe." He offers wildly varying responses to Mashinsky's estimate of the amount of real money in the system and tries, unconvincingly, to wave away the problem of lost investor funds in collapsing exchanges. He is unable to explain why FTX listed a "stablecoin" called Terra, which Bankman-Fried himself had described on Twitter as "transparently" about to falter.

Such performances, amazingly, didn't seem to hurt SBF. If anything, they added to his mystique. There is a tendency, under capitalism, to equate money with smarts, to assume that fortune is downstream from genius. If SBF and his counterparts in the industry often seemed unable to explain the underlying information technology and the basic financial principles on which their companies operated, they could allude to a kind of impenetrable black-box computer magic, and this deliberate obscurantism, ironically, seemed to make it all more trustworthy to the great masses of ordinary investors who propped it all up. The wealth of those at the top was an alibi and an excuse for anything: They were rich, so they must be doing something right; they were rich, so the technology must be good. Individual failures down at the bottom of the pyramid were failures of intelligence, nerve, and will. How could they be otherwise? It occurred to shockingly few people that the guys at the top made all that money not because they were smart, not because they were good, but because they were thieves.

Fear of missing out is a powerful economic motivator, which bland theories of rational individual economic actors do not capture.

As the SEC's damning and voluminous complaint against Binance showed, and as much recent reporting on the implosion of FTX has told us, these are not just unlicensed exchanges trading underregulated equities (bad enough), but their main business is, in effect, to take their own customers' money and use it to engage in wild financial speculation and self-dealing. (SBF used $10 *billion* in FTX customer funds to prop up his Alameda Research trading firm, among other alleged misdeeds.) Small investors were left with a bag of irredeemable, and therefore worthless, digital assets.

THE PONZI SCHEMERS who sat at the top of this ecosystem may have been transparently corrupt and self-interested criminals, but many of their marks and unwitting accomplices were nevertheless the kind of half-charming libertarian kooks who still read Ayn Rand as grown-ups, ensconced in a casino fantasy that betting is science and that markets and market forces are natural phenomena and natural laws, like stars or gravity. The book's sadder portraits are of the many small investors who lost their shirts (and in some cases their lives; small-time crypto investors have distressingly high suicide rates) in this fiasco. Lured by the promise of quick riches, bolstered by cultish slogans like WAGMI ("we're all gonna make it"), and gripped by an equally cultish penchant for excommunicating anyone who questions the precepts of the group, these small-time investors are easy prey for an industry that views them with utter contempt.

These are men like Harold "Hal" Henson, a preacher and "dreamer in the grand tradition of American men of a certain generation, believing that financial success was always around the corner," whose unattainable hopes for a fortune to pass on to his grandchildren led from multilevel marketing scams to amateur forex trading and a fly-by-night crypto trading firm called Stallion Wings that took him for all he had and destroyed his relationship with the very family he was trying, in his misguided way, to protect and provide for. Day-trading, sports books, and MLM schemes are frequent pathways into crypto. For every crypto trader motivated by pure greed and acquisitiveness, there is another person who is simply trying to claw his way to financial success, in a society whose impressively resilient aggregate economic statistics mask a deep well of precarity. Is it any wonder people gamble and then double down on bad hands once they're too deep in the hole to see any other way out?

This is the most condemnable aspect of crypto, and one that should guide us to a more skeptical and critical attitude toward its successor scams, schemes, and investment opportunities in tech. Because all the talk of "smart contracts" and immutable ledgers, of algorithmic black boxes that create value from nothing—of the technology itself—simply obscured a time-honored, analog truth: that promises of secret knowledge and quick riches are as powerful as any narcotic, and addictive as well. The technology is the fluttering newspaper to the face while with the other hand they pick your pocket. In technology and finance alike, we are too easily led down the dead-end path of asking: *How does it work*? Aren't the real questions, though: *What is it good for, and for whom*? TNR

Jacob Bacharach *is a novelist and essayist. His most recent book is* A Cool Customer: Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking.

Labor Pains

How convincing is Sohrab Ahmari's plan to free workers from corporate tyranny?

By Michael Kazin

"A RELATIVELY NARROW elite lords over a class hierarchy whose obscene disparities would have left the plutocrats of the Gilded Age blushing," Sohrab Ahmari declares in his vigorous jeremiad *Tyranny, Inc.* Dismantling the reigning neoliberal order, he contends, would require "a labor market in which most sectors are unionized" and a higher minimum wage for all workers, giving labor the "security needed to mount countervailing power in the absence of labor organization."

Such statements would be unremarkable if a leftist or a liberal Democrat had written them. Members of the Progressive Caucus in Congress routinely make sharp critiques of corporate power, while socialists agree that a historic surge in union numbers and power would be essential to launching any serious attack on economic inequality. As one can guess from its title, *The Corporate Sabotage of America's Future*, a new book by Robert Weissman and Joan Claybrook—the present and past heads of the venerable consumer advocacy group Public Citizen—indicts similar culprits and offers similar solutions.

But for most of the past decade, the 38-year-old author of *Tyranny, Inc.* has

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY OMEL

COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE; CAROL M. HIGHSMITH/BUYENLARGE/GETTY

been a prominent voice on the journalistic wing of the American right. Ahmari wrote and edited opinion pieces for *The Wall Street Journal*; contributed frequently to *Commentary* and *First Things*, a prominent magazine on the Christian right; and served the Murdoch empire again as oped editor of the *New York Post*. In 2019, the Iranian-born convert to Roman Catholicism co-drafted a "manifesto of sorts," published in *First Things*. It rebuked any conservative willing to negotiate about "the dignity of every unborn life" or who "bowed to a poisonous and censorious multiculturalism." Ahmari has made the case that Donald Trump is the conservative movement's best hope. While acknowledging that he "sometimes failed to translate his rhetoric into reality," Ahmari has argued that Trump "alone offers Americans a chance to confront and chasten their failed elites," and expressed hopes that the several-times-indicted tyrant will carry the GOP standard in 2024. A prolific and provocative writer with close to 150,000 Twitter followers, Ahmari is one of the more influential figures on the populist right who has never held political office.

The dissonance between his traditionalist line on cultural issues and his progressive approach to political economy makes Ahmari's new book a fascinating document in the intellectual evolution of the right since the days when neoconservatives like William Kristol and Dick Cheney defined its course. A primary objective of their movement—and of the Republican Party it came to dominate—was to cut taxes on the rich and roll back regulations on the firms some of them ran. But today's GOP is most vocal about cultural issues and is even willing to fight large corporations over them. (Take, for example, Ron DeSantis's battle with Disney and his campaign against environmental, social, and governance investments, or ESG.) Ahmari goes further, taking aim not just at "woke" capital but at a salient feature of modern capitalism itself: how "self-seeking private actors" benefit from a system of "structural, class-based domination" that makes Americans unfree in many aspects of their daily lives.

Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It
by Sohrab Ahmari
Forum Books,
288 pp., $28.00

MORE THAN HALF the chapters in *Tyranny, Inc.* open with a contemporary horror story of business abuse, followed by an analysis of the nefarious legal and political forces that made it possible. After Alicia Fleming, a restaurant server from Massachusetts, had her first child, her employer refused to schedule her working hours more than a few days in advance. She struggled to find someone to care for the baby when she had to be on duty at the restaurant past midnight. For Ahmari, Fleming's plight is a prime example of the psychological as well as economic plight of millions of wage earners who lack the protection of unions or the type of workplace regulations that a strong labor movement could get the state to enact. Not "until *a year and a half later*, well into a crucial development phase for her baby," Ahmari reports, did Fleming land a job that enabled her to plan her life at work and home with any predictability.

Another chapter begins with the tale of the Purcells, a working-class couple from Surprise, Arizona, who got stuck with a bill of almost $20,000 from a private firefighting company after their trailer home burned down. The town, they later learned, had neglected to inform residents they had to buy an annual "fire subscription plan" from a firm called Rural/Metro if they wanted to avoid being hit with an exorbitant surprise on top of the misery the flames would bring.

The Purcells' story gives Ahmari an opportunity to vilify the private equity firms that snapped up Rural/Metro and other fire and ambulance companies during and after the Great Recession. Like clever vultures, PE companies finance their purchases with debt and then dun unsuspecting customers to earn back their investment and more. "There is *nothing inevitable*," Ahmari seethes, "about a family having to pay $20,000 for lousy private firefighting services they never asked for" or "about patients being deprived of urgent care because a thirtysomething Harvard MBA … loaded up the local ambulance service with unsustainable debt, causing vehicles to fall into disrepair and staff to be laid off." A decent society would take care of people in extremis efficiently and cheaply, if not for free. Yet sadly, the United States has betrayed the common sense of the common good.

Ahmari's indictment of corporate tyranny and its powerful enablers moves from outrage to outrage. He describes how nonunion employees get forced to take their grievances to arbitration, where their bosses have all the advantages, instead of being allowed to sue in open court. He reports how hedge funds bought up hundreds of local papers, slashing jobs and selling office buildings to make a killing. He lambastes huge corporations like Johnson & Johnson and Purdue Pharma for exploiting bankruptcy laws and finding sympathetic judges to severely limit the size of payments to Americans whose lives their products have ruined. Each chapter reads like a well-crafted, extended opinion piece: Short quotes from specialists back up the alarming claims, and vivid metaphorical chapter titles—"Gagged by the Contract," "Parched for Truth," "The Corporate Eroder"—drive his points home. Ahmari has compressed a wealth of investigative sleuthing done by others into a convincing portrait of a market economy that is "free" only for those who have the resources and connections to manipulate it to their advantage.

Ahmari is hardly the first American conservative to make a trenchant attack on the coercive powers of big business. In the 1930s, Southern Agrarian intellectuals like John Crowe Ransom defended a romanticized—and racist—notion of old Dixie against "a system which allows a relatively few men to control most of the nation's wealth and to regiment virtually the whole population under their anonymous holding companies and corporations." In the 1990s, paleoconservatives like Patrick Buchanan and Sam Francis launched fusillades against global corporations that moved good American manufacturing jobs abroad and had "no loyalty to workers and no allegiance to any nation." When Trump vowed to end "American carnage" in his 2017 inaugural address, he was snarling much the same tune.

Since the late nineteenth century, several leaders of Ahmari's own church

have called for robust limits on the freedom of employers and financiers to run the economy for their own benefit. "Some opportune remedy must be found quickly," wrote Pope Leo XIII in an 1891 encyclical, "for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class." He called on Catholic wage earners to form unions and for governments to raise the living standards of the poor. Forty years later, Pope Pius XI blasted the "immense power and despotic economic dictatorship" of "a few," including those who "control credit … and rule the lending of money." Ahmari is well aware of this tradition. At one point, he remarks how close Pope Leo's views about the "masters of industry" were to those of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Of course, Ahmari's favored alternative to capitalist tyranny is not the radical break that Marx and his socialist disciples espoused. He has a more moderate and homegrown example in mind: the New Deal. He praises FDR's program for its ability "to defang—or at least … soften the bite of—coercion in the marketplace" and for helping organized labor become a countervailing power to big business in the workplace. Ahmari recognizes that the order liberals built during the 1930s and that endured for several decades fell short of achieving the kind of social democracy that flourished in Western and Northern Europe and that remains mostly intact in places like Denmark and Finland today. He prefers the ungainly term "political-exchange capitalism" to describe the "political give-and-take in relations between the asset rich and the asset-less." But in its essential aspects, social democracy is the name of his desire. Reviving it in this century would, he might say, make America great again.

CAN LIBERALS SEEK an alliance of mutual convenience with this self-described "pro-life New Dealer"? Should they even try to create what Ahmari calls a "left-right consensus in favor of tackling the coercion inherent to markets"? He has made a sustained effort to reach across the intellectual chasm to pro-union, anti-corporate activists and thinkers on the left. Last year, Ahmari attended the biennial conference of Labor Notes, a gathering of grassroots union organizers and enthusiasts where conservatives are usually as common as anarchists in Congress. He predictably made fun of the "pronoun stickers" and the "genuflection at the altar of racialized politics" he witnessed there. But Ahmari advised his "right-wing confrères" to embrace the cause of union growth anyway. The wages of 90 percent of working Americans, he points out, "have remained stagnant for about 30 years." Therefore, "as the labor movement seeks to democratize our economy, and to enhance the power of workers … it remains a profoundly decent, humane force."

That article appeared in Compact, the online magazine Ahmari co-founded in the spring of 2022, which hosts a sometimes bewildering but well-curated mélange of voices from both left and right. On any given day, the site might feature a piece by a Marxist like Vivek Chibber, Slavoj Žižek, or Christian Parenti. On others, stalwart conservatives like the journalist Christopher Caldwell and the political theorist Patrick Deneen take the virtual floor. Whatever their differences, all these writers share an antagonism toward identity politics and what Ahmari deems "the left's weird cultural tics"—from Drag Queen Story Hour to "the latest in gender ideology and Ibram X. Kendi Thought." The best escape from the horrors of "wokeness," they believe, would be a robust populism that champions the economic interests of working-class people.

At the end of *Tyranny, Inc.*, Ahmari argues that both sets of ideologues should abandon some cherished initiatives that really just serve their corporate masters. "Lifestyle leftists" unwittingly aid big business by gaining "symbolic victories" over speech codes and executive diversity while their bosses undermine union drives and hold down wages. He scolds conservatives for hewing to "a downright ludicrous politics centered on preaching timeless virtues" that does nothing "to alter the fundamental balance of power between corporations and the rest of us." Both groups should recognize that only a vigorous and sustained working-class movement can brush aside their misleading narratives and make America "the land of the free" once more.

Although Ahmari is no Marxist, such reasoning echoes the vulgar species of that venerable worldview. One cannot reduce political combat to a struggle over material power and interests. *Tyranny, Inc*. never seriously engages with the race, ethnicity, or immigrant status of any of the victims of business venality whose stories he tells. It would be wonderful if the 90 percent of American workers stuck at the same pay level bonded over their common plight. But a reliable analysis of why they have not done so must confront the primacy of those identities, divisive or otherwise: Neither now or in the past have most wage earners in our always multiracial, always unequal nation considered themselves to be members of a united working class, and the assumption that one can easily put those differences aside makes no more sense when it comes from the right than from the left. And it is no coincidence that, as Ahmari mentioned in his report on the Labor Notes conference, most of the young people leading the still quite modest revival of unionism also cheer on Black Lives Matter and defend the rights of LGBTQ people. "Solidarity" is a more pluralist, multicultural commitment than it was back in the 1930s, when the dominant imagery and reality of organized labor were white and male.

Ahmari's book also ignores the most urgent issue right and left battle over today—on which he elsewhere takes a fierce, uncompromising stand. No pregnant waitress or warehouse worker who wants an abortion would be persuaded to change her mind because a devout Roman Catholic man tells her she would be committing murder. And to denounce the coercive behavior of corporate bosses while smiling on that of politicians who outlaw the right to terminate a pregnancy requires a definition of "liberty" that a majority of Americans decisively reject by nearly a two-to-one margin.

In his book, Ahmari omits his hatred of abortion while making a strong case for a capitalism that would cheat working people less and give them more power to control their lives on the job and in the marketplace. But given his silence, he cannot explain why it is any more acceptable to force millions of those women and men to live by a theology with which they disagree than it is to compel them to shell out thousands of dollars for private fire insurance or to submit to binding arbitration. He also fails to mention that the same devout Catholic justices on the Supreme Court whom he derides for letting employers "get away with wage underpayment" also voted unanimously to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

FOR AHMARI AND his fellow Compact writers, there is no enemy more despicable than liberalism. Last year, the

magazine's co-editor Matthew Schmitz, another convert to Catholicism, paraphrased an old quip from Norman Mailer: "You can call me anything you want, just don't call me a liberal." It is libertarians on the right who uphold the freedom of capitalists to crush unions, and liberals on the left who think people should be free to marry someone of the same gender or change that gender at will. In his new book, *Regime Change*, promoted by Compact, Patrick Deneen deplores "the rise of a distinctive ruling class that today dominates the institutions of the West. Members of this ruling class are selected for their support and defense of the liberal order." Only the overthrow of this "regime" that, according to Deneen, "has globally ravaged the working classes, leaving them simultaneously in a condition of economic precarity and social disintegration," will do.

Liberals and leftists who muse about forming a united front with the right against the corporate elite might study how an earlier uneasy alliance worked out—between the Northern and Southern Democrats who enacted the signature legislation of the New Deal. Both party factions endorsed FDR and cheered his populist attacks on the "economic royalists" in the GOP who fought to preserve their largely unregulated wealth and power. While vowing to uphold Jim Crow forever, Dixie politicians also happily voted to create Social Security, fund public works jobs, subsidize crop prices, and bring electricity to farms and homes in their region, then the poorest in the nation. Co-sponsor of the act that established the Tennessee Valley Authority was Representative John E. Rankin from Mississippi—a vicious figure who also proposed a ban on interracial marriage and claimed a federal anti-lynching bill would "encourage Negroes to think they can rape our white women!"

It's hard to see how contemporary populists, right and left, would find a way to work together to emulate that alliance. As steadfast cultural conservatives, Ahmari, Deneen, and their ilk are quite unlikely to support Democrats like Sherrod Brown and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who share their economic views but feel just as strongly about protecting reproductive freedom and marriage equality. The progressive activists who routinely campaign for the latter would probably desert those politicians in a hurry if they welcomed a partnership with former and future backers of Trump. And although Josh Hawley and Marco Rubio blurbed *Tyranny, Inc.*, neither they nor any other Republican senators support the PRO Act, which would remove some of the major legal barriers to organizing unions. Not a single GOP lawmaker voted to confirm Jared Bernstein, long one of the most prominent pro-labor scholars in the United States, to chair Biden's Council of Economic Advisers.

So the prospect for a serious crackdown on private tyranny and a new surge of unionism will depend, as in earlier eras, on the emergence of mass movements that organize for those ends and consistent electoral triumphs by a party that favors them. It is good news that an increasing number of conservatives soundly reject the "free-market" gospel that was the bedrock of right-wing ideology and policy since the onset of the New Deal. But the kind of "regime change" that illiberal populists favor would leave ordinary Americans even more divided from one another than they are already. And it would embolden greater assaults on personal liberty rather than spawn a new birth of freedom from corporate rule. TNR

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The Lady Vanishes

The Changeling's story of a wife's disappearance misses the woman herself.

By Phillip Maciak

LAST FALL, a TV series premiered about a man in New York City whose wife has disappeared without a trace. He searches for her in vain, both longing for his lost love and furious with her for her transgression against him and their children. As he embarks upon this quest, the very cityscape of Manhattan turns itself upside down, a repeated cinematographic trick meant to visually emphasize the degree to which this man's reality has been unsettled by loss. As viewers, we are so close to his perspective that his anger and his grief are palpable; they are the ground upon which we walk.

But then, there's a twist! In the penultimate episode, we see the show's events from the point of view of the lost wife. In place of this man's story of abandonment and betrayal, we see a woman's story of pain disbelieved, of subjectivity unrecognized, of trauma ignored. The man, it turns out, was the source and amplifier of this woman's anguish rather than the hero seeking to save her from it. The twist comes late enough that we end up spending much more time with that guy anyway, but still: The story you thought you were watching was not the story you were actually watching all along.

The show I'm talking about, of course, is FX's *Fleishman Is in Trouble*, Taffy Brodesser-Akner's 2022 comedy of manners about wealthy New Yorkers in crisis, but nearly every description I've offered—down to the topsy-turvy camera gimmick—might also apply to Apple TV+'s new horror-drama *The Changeling*. The show is an ambitious, and relatively faithful, adaptation by veteran screenwriter Kelly Marcel of Victor LaValle's acclaimed 2017 novel of the same name, and it's characterized by the novel's signature melting pot of cultural, historical, and mythical references. Nominally the story of a couple going through the turmoil of new parenthood, it's also, explicitly, a fairy tale, replete with witches and mole people and fairies.

Like *Fleishman*, the show is centrally concerned with modern parenthood, but *The Changeling* intermingles the mundanities of child-rearing with the marvelousness of folklore. So, alongside contemporary tales like the hero's journey of the "good dad" and the almost supernatural, enforced invisibility of women's pain, we have Scandinavian mythology, urban legend, and even social media typologies. North Brother Island in the East River becomes a locus of sorcery and enchantment; the nurseries and playgrounds of infanthood attain the same level of magic and dread by association.

But, also like *Fleishman*, *The Changeling* tells the story of a woman's pain by way of her husband. In *Fleishman*, the real story was always that of a woman erased, not a woman missing. We are meant to be chastened as viewers when we realize how credulously we had believed the man's version of events. *The Changeling*'s tale of a woman's pain is less hidden from us than it is smothered by a television series too busy, too pleased with its own bravado, to give it the time and attention it deserves. Why are we spending so much time inside the Trojan horse?

***THE CHANGELING* BEGINS** in 1968 with the meet-not-so-cute of white parole officer Brian West (Jared Abrahamson) and recent Ugandan immigrant Lillian Kagwa (played by Alexis Louder in flashback and Adina Porter in the present). Brian asks Lillian out on a date, and she refuses him, but he persists, asking and asking until she finally relents nearly 10 years later. They marry and have a son named Apollo. Thirtysomething years later, Apollo (played by a number of actors at different ages but finally LaKeith Stanfield in the present) has his own chance encounter with the lovely, hard-to-get Emma (Clark Backo). Their early relationship uncannily echoes that of Apollo's own parents: Emma, like Lillian, agrees to her suitor's overtures only after multiple rejections; on the first date, Apollo, like Brian, very bluntly declares that his main goal in life is to have children and be a good father; both couples appear to fall instantly in love. You may find these gestures a bit aggressive, though it's sometimes unclear whether the show finds them romantic, threatening, or some mixture of both.

The wrinkles in these parallel stories are the source of the show's main mysteries. In the earlier timeline, the main puzzle is Brian's abandonment of Lillian and Apollo,

COURTESY OF APPLE +

as well as the later arrival of a box of his belongings labeled IMPROBABILIA, which contains, among other things, an eerie children's book about fairies who like eating babies. The wrinkles in the present timeline both focus on Emma. In between her first date with Apollo and their eventual marriage, Emma goes on a months-long journey to Brazil. There, against the advice of locals, she visits a witch who ties a red string around her wrist and grants her three wishes. Upon her return, Emma relays this story to Apollo, who utters his catchphrase—"I am the god Apollo"—and cuts the string from her wrist. "With me, all three of your wishes will come true," he tells her. Again, it sounds like a threat.

The two soon marry, and Emma announces she's pregnant. In a harrowing and surprisingly funny set piece, Emma gives birth in a subway car—a crew of subway dancers provide moral and logistical support—but life after baby is no fairy tale, or at least not a Disney one. After her brief parental leave, Emma begins to exhibit symptoms of postpartum depression, anxiety, and even psychosis. She also begins to receive strange text messages with pictures of her baby that appear to have been taken from a distance, and which disappear from her phone before she can show them to anybody. During this time, Emma comes to believe that her son has been replaced by unseen forces, and that the baby she and Apollo now care for is a changeling.

Clark Backo is very simply an electrifying actor. When *The Changeling* is able to pull off its magical realist gambit, it is almost always because of Backo's versatile performance. Emma visits a priest and schedules a baptism in the last-ditch hope that maybe the Holy Spirit can intercede in whatever's going on in her life. We see her pitch the idea to Apollo—a god, but also an atheist—and later we see her meet the priest in flashback. In both scenes, we watch Backo alternate between the scary certainty of a mind possessed and the unnerving chaos of a mind ill-at-ease. These interpretations flit visibly past each other on Backo's face—both conveying the reality of a woman in the midst of a real-life horror story and making us question what is true.

But *The Changeling* is not a show about Emma; it's a show about her disappearance. And so, after she commits a horrifically violent act (off-screen, thank goodness) and subsequently vanishes, the show follows Apollo on his search for her. He finds a rare book, meets and joins forces with a troll, and he discovers a colony of feminist witches in the East River. Amid these incredibly confusing events, he shows an extraordinary lack of curiosity, rarely asking his captors and interlocutors the questions he—and we as viewers—need answered in order to move forward. His egotism and myopia further blur our view of the larger puzzle. He exudes an unshakable confidence in his own righteousness, whether he is flashing back to Emma telling him what a good father he will be or winning over the witches with his dadly energy. "You're a good man," one of them tells him, for seemingly no reason at all other than that he showed up.

On its own, this might be a keen insight about contemporary parenting, that women have to work three times as hard to be seen as competent parents, while men are greeted as feminist heroes for solo outings with their infant children. But the show doesn't exactly go in that direction: While *The Changeling* spends a good amount of time on the various betrayals and complex ethical negotiations that define "good" motherhood, Apollo's status as a "good father" is relatively unquestioned. *The Changeling* wants to—and frequently does—use Emma to tell a knotty, empathetic story about the violence and longing inherent in motherhood. Apollo, meanwhile, declares his intention to be a good father in the pilot, and the show simply grants his wish.

IN A GREAT 2018 essay, the critic Lili Loofbourow describes a media environment well aware of the grip "the male gaze" once had on Hollywood. Filmmakers and showrunners might want to avoid the lurid objectification of women, but they have replaced that gaze with what she calls "the male glance." Instead of being leered at, women are simply ignored, not attended to at all. "Rather than linger lovingly on the parts it wants most to penetrate," Loofbourow writes, the male glance "looks, assumes, and moves on." It is a means of dismissing women's stories as not worth the trouble, "forgetting to zoom in," as Loofbourow elsewhere writes. Rather than settling into voyeurism, we don't watch at all.

Sometimes, then, narratives about women's pain—childbirth, routine medical procedures performed without anesthesia, the disbelief and dismissal that greets women suffering from postpartum depression, anxiety, or psychosis—come to us initially through the stories of their husbands or partners. Granted this cultural power of magnetism and capaciousness, a canny writer might wonder if that male magnetism was enough to draw viewers into women's stories they might not otherwise encounter; what if that capaciousness were enough to hold them? So, up rolls the Trojan horse.

To *The Changeling*'s credit, it does not simply sign over Emma's story to Apollo. We certainly view her own experience earlier and more often than *Fleishman* allows. But it's not only Apollo working to avert our eyes from Emma: Her horror story frequently gets lost beneath the spectacle of all this revisionist mythmaking. Though sometimes we encounter a thrilling admixture of myth and reality, each episode calls upon so many different touchstones with such frenetic frequency that it can't possibly do them all justice. One episode hopscotches between the 1968 New York City garbage strike, a shadow play of the Ugandan genocide, and a mournful fantasy about the early AIDS crisis—all as background for the story of one marriage's dissolution. The show simply doesn't have enough time to do more than transform these events into metaphors at best or background scenery at worst. As visually striking as it is, it's hard to feel that the scene in which two Lena Horne impersonators sing the entirety of "Stormy Weather" to a naked man dying of AIDS is an earned moment, considering that the AIDS crisis has no overt bearing on the rest of the plot, and the man himself is a figment of another character's imagination.

In a version of this series that accomplished all it's trying to do, every one of these fantastical diversions and gritty realities would play into one another, each reinforcing some unexpected other element of the story, producing a sense of organic connection, of historical and spiritual transcendence. As one character explains, "the new fears are the old fears, and the old fears are ancient." More often, though, the show feels distracted by all of its elements. Their resonances come off as strained or thin rather than revelatory, their invocations neither infectiously playful nor movingly serious.

Both for its promise and its missteps, then, *The Changeling* can be a frustrating show to watch. The witch whom Emma eventually meets in the middle of the East River promises her, and all the other women she finds there, "a place where they will be believed." The show believes Emma, too; it just won't stay with her, for reasons both fantastical and familiar. TNR

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Life Support

Only Murders in the Building illuminates the perilous business of getting by in New York.

By Jennifer Wilson

"HERE'S A THING I don't get: people who worry about living in a big city because of all the crime," declares Charles-Haden Savage (Steve Martin), a washed-up TV detective whose residual checks allow him to live a comfortable life in a stately co-operative apartment building on the Upper West Side called the Arconia. There are too many eyes on you in a place like New York City for anything sinister to happen to you, Charles explains. Crime is for places like Oklahoma (Charles is an avid listener to *All Is Not OK in Oklahoma*, a true-crime podcast hosted by a Sarah Koenig–esque reporter named Cinda Canning, played by Tina Fey). No, in New York City, says Charles, "We're packed in tight and stacked on top of each other, like those of us who live at the Arconia."

Now in its third year, the Hulu hit *Only Murders in the Building* is up to three bodies, one per season, all found on the premises of the Arconia. In the first season, Charles and his team of resident-detectives, Oliver (Martin Short) and Mabel (Selena Gomez), investigated the murder of Tim Kono (Julian Cihi), a rude, reclusive young man who lived on the ninth floor. ("Tim was the reason we couldn't use our fireplaces," Charles learns at a co-op meeting. "I hated that guy!") In the second season, the president of the co-op board is found dead. ("You lucky bitch," Canning later tells Mabel. "It's like these murders just fall in your lap.") By that time, Charles, Oliver, and Mabel have become famous as the co-hosts of an entire podcast—also titled *Only Murders in the Building*—devoted to the mysterious demise of their neighbors.

How could murder befall this cozy, cheery building, filled with comedic geniuses wearing fall sweaters that even Miranda Priestly would approve of? (Meryl Streep, as it happens, joined the cast for Season 3.) I also mean this practically: *how*? Every apartment in the Arconia faces the grand courtyard. In other words, there are more eyes and ears in this Upper West Side residential community than there are old copies of *The New Yorker*. In the opening minutes of the series premiere, we get our first clue to this mystery. Right after Charles finishes his monologue about the safety of a highly trafficked urban enclave, he hops into an elevator and presses the "close door" button as he sees his neighbor, theater director Oliver Putnam, making his way over with a heavy stack of packages. Oliver squeezes his way in, and Mabel hops on, too, but she is glued to her phone. There is a distinction here between seeing and looking out for your neighbors.

In her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs derided courtyards like the one at the Arconia as privatized versions of the sidewalk, and, as such, not really sidewalks at all. Courtyards represented, Jacobs believed, the opposite of the street, "where the public space is unequivocally public." Hiding behind the cozy, seemingly uncontroversial facade of *Only Murders in the Building* is a show that shares Jacobs's perspective in this regard. The show is a bold critique, particularly in its new season, of the sort of comfort that the residents of the Arconia enjoy in a city where so many are deeply, painfully uncomfortable.

The true-crime podcasting team of Charles, Mabel, and Oliver uses the murder mystery to model the act and ethics of noticing in a building where many residents have become inured to the pain of those around them, even those who live right next door. (When Kono is found dead, the tenants on his floor start fighting over who can buy his unit to conjoin with their own.) In this way, *Only Murders in the Building* is less an apologia for true-crime fandom, and more an acknowledgment of what that fandom expresses: a deep-seated desire to build community, to solve problems, and listen to one another, addictively.

ON THE NIGHT of their awkward elevator encounter, Charles, Oliver, and Mabel are each in their apartments listening to the latest episode of *All Is Not OK in Oklahoma*. The camera peers in their respective windows as they separately listen to the same sound: Cinda Canning's voice.

> When Ray Butler walked me into the woods behind his barn that night in Chickasha [dog barking], I wasn't expecting to find anything related to the disappearance of his niece, Becky. I was thinking more about Ray's unorthodox clothing choice for farm living. [insects chirping] But that all changed because of what was going on next to the riverbed, where Ray's old Lab, Bo [barking], was digging at something in the dirt. [digging] Once he got his dug-up prize, Bo ran proudly to me with it dangling in his mouth. It took a moment to absorb what it was, but then it became all too clear. Bo had found ...

Just then, a fire alarm sounds in the Arconia. Charles decamps to a restaurant nearby and tries to pick up the podcast where he left off. Oliver walks in and sees Charles has laid out a map of the last known whereabouts of Becky Butler, the missing girl in the show. They smile at each other like lovestruck teenagers. Soon, Mabel spots them chatting. "What the fuck is in Bo's mouth?" she exclaims. "Becky's panties!" they scream back at her in excitement.

Fandom leads to friendship, and when the three return to the Arconia to find police investigating the death of Tim Kono, found dead during the fire drill, they all instinctively leap into action. The police declare it a suicide, but Charles, Oliver, and Mabel suspect foul play. They saw him that morning on the elevator, carrying trash from one floor to another. "Why would he get on the elevator with that? There's a chute on every floor," Charles questions. It is the sort of detail that only a nosy neighbor would notice, setting the tone for the show's uniquely residential take on sleuthdom. Oliver suggests they turn their new hobby into a podcast, and, while they

PATRICK HARBRON/HULU

are at it, maybe they could investigate a "mysterious death" that occurred in Central Park. "No, we've got to focus," says Charles. "Only murders in the building."

Oliver's suggestion is born of necessity. This is no hobby; it is a hustle. Oliver is broke, and on the verge of getting evicted. Though he purchased his apartment over 30 years ago, when the Arconia was "affordable," he tells Mabel, he is now behind on building maintenance fees. His career as a theater director has never recovered from the catastrophe that was *Splash! The Musical* (the pool malfunctioned, causing mermen to dive onto a hard wooden floor). His plan works, and by Season 3 Oliver has made a comeback. When the season opens, he has been tapped to make *Death Rattle*, a musical about a murder that occurs in a lighthouse. The suspects are the only three people who were in the room at the time a young mother was killed: her own triplet babies. "Angelic little triplets or triple threats?" Charles, whom Oliver casts as a constable, sings: "It's time to give these teething, seething three the third degree!" The poster bears an obvious resemblance to that of *Rosemary's Baby*, another New York City tale of housing horror.

The attention surrounding the podcast has also attracted a big star to the production. No, not Meryl Streep (who appears in the new season as Loretta, a struggling actress). The star is to be Ben Glenroy (Paul Rudd)—an actor known for his detective role in *Girl Cop*. It is a great act of stunt casting, but his Broadway debut is upended by another stunt; he is killed on opening night after a party at Oliver's apartment (keeping this murder in the building). As Mabel starts investigating, Oliver panics that he might lose another cast member to jail: "The key here is to find a murderer that won't cost me the Tony," he begs her.

Perhaps because Ben was not a longtime resident of the Arconia, his death becomes less tied to the particulars of apartment life and more about the harrowing experience that is creating a career in the arts while living in New York City. Streep's Loretta is a perpetually out-of-work actress who gets by as a professional gift wrapper. At first, Mabel suspects Kimber (Ashley Park), a young actress Ben was rumored to have dated, of poisoning him with one of the anti-aging serums she hawks on TikTok to supplement her income. Though Mabel is meant to be investigating Kimber, she sees herself in her. "You manage all this?" Mabel asks, surveying the amount of sellable product Kimber stores in her dressing room. "You know how it is. Being our age in New York," Kimber replies. "You have to hustle if you want to make it here."

Mabel never treated the podcast as a job, but she is realizing she might have to, especially what with Oliver and Charles distracted by *Death Rattle*. Cinda Canning tries to entice Mabel to join her podcast production company, but only as a solo act. Mabel refuses out of loyalty. What is she going to do to survive then? asks Cinda. Mabel, recalling Kimber, answers: "I might sell kombucha. Or open boxes on YouTube. You know, do a side hustle." Canning, ostensibly a villain, turns to Mabel with a checkbook and says, "What I'm offering is structure. A paycheck." The scene is meant to be an instance of the little guy refusing to sell out to the cynical big-money operation, but I found that difficult to parse at first, because, watching it play out, I found myself thinking: *Why can't this happen to me*?

THOUGH *Only Murders in the Building* has never been didactic, and the murders are never explicitly social in nature, the work of detection often leads our three heroes down a path of forensic sociology. As they investigate the people around them, Charles, Oliver, and Mabel learn just how incapable of sustaining life their environment has become. In the first season, we see the super's son wrongfully accused of a crime by a wealthy resident and encounter an elderly woman who has no social world outside of the co-op meeting. In Season 3, the show turns its attention to working actors struggling to make ends meet in New York City. Indeed, a recurring theme in *Only Murders in the Building* is that a person does not have to wind up dead to have come dangerously close to not making it.

Yet at the same time, the show, and this season in particular, is a rousing defense of why art matters and why we cannot afford to lose the people who make it, certainly not to murder—but also, more broadly, not to the exploitative labor conditions that SAG and the WGA are currently striking against. At one point, Mabel confides to Charles that she is getting emotional about Ben's death because the only way she and her mother could communicate during a turbulent time in their relationship was by watching *Girl Cop*. They watched the show at the same time, in separate rooms, but would laugh at the same lines at the same time. Art is an essential bridge, and, in its latest season, *Only Murders in the Building* has chosen to cheer on the very people who bring the show to life, whose art organizes us into fandoms today, and who knows what tomorrow. TNR

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Res Publica
by Win McCormack

Hot Enough For You?

After this summer, no one can deny our climate crisis.

On Sunday, July 30, of this year, *The Wall Street Journal* published a column by Allysia Finley, a member of the paper's editorial board, entitled "CLIMATE CHANGE OBSESSION IS A REAL MENTAL DISORDER." You could deduce from the title that the writer was no serious thinker, despite her degree from Stanford University. "The media wants you to know it's hot outside," she wrote sarcastically, quoting a line from a CNN broadcast: "'Heat health emergency': Nearly half the US at risk." She also referenced a *Bloomberg* article with the headline "EXTREME TEMPERATURES ARE HURTING OUR MENTAL HEALTH." It turns out Finley also reads *The New Yorker*, for she quotes from a 4,400-word article it published, written by Jia Tolentino, that poses the question, "WHAT TO DO WITH CLIMATE EMOTIONS?," which Tolentino answers thusly: "It may be impossible to seriously consider the reality of climate change for longer than ninety seconds without feeling depressed, angry, guilty, grief-stricken, or simply insane." But of course Finley had a counter to that: "Climate hypochondriacs deserve to be treated with compassion, much like anyone who suffers from mental illness."

The following day, July 31, the *Journal* published a screed by the infamous climate change–denier Bjørn Lomborg, titled "CLIMATE CHANGE HASN'T SET THE WORLD ON FIRE." It was not a coincidence that the *Journal* published these two pieces back-to-back when it did, at the precise turning of July into August. The month of July 2023 was, according to Gavin Schmidt, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, "not just warmer than any previous July—it was the warmest month in our record, which goes back to 1880. The science is clear this isn't normal. Alarming warming around the world is driven primarily by human-caused greenhouse gas emissions." Lomborg, however, put most of his focus on the number of fires occurring around the globe annually, which he claimed has been steadily diminishing in this century. "In 2022, the last year for which there are complete data," he assured his readers, "the world hit a new record-low of 2.2% burned area."

During the summer of 2023, from the end of June to July 30, the city of Phoenix experienced temperatures of not less than 110 degrees, while also confronting the most 115-degree days in a single calendar year, and some days even hotter than that. *The Arizona Republic* ran a headline that begins "WILL THE INFERNO NEVER END?" Of course, the inferno was not confined to Arizona; it was nationwide and worldwide. By August, the heat wave that had engulfed the South and Southwest of the United States during July spread to the Midwest, where in some places the heat index (combining both temperature and humidity) reached 100 degrees and above. The smoke came from the Canadian wildfires, mixed with the intense heat and humidity to create particularly noxious air for Midwesterners to breathe. It was reported that some people were making a schedule to do as much of their work as they could during the nighttime hours and get their sleep during the day. The saddest American event of the summer was the complete destruction by wildfires of the beloved Maui town of Lahaina. I write on the subject of community, and it was clear from the news coverage that Lahaina was a genuine close-knit community, but sadly one whose overseers were unprepared to handle such an event.

What was transpiring in terms of climate in the rest of the world this past summer? Ocean temperatures were the highest ever recorded. Much of Southern Europe was besieged by its own scorching temperatures and wildfires, along with torrential rains creating dangerously overflowing rivers. In Slovenia, unusually heavy rains created what the prime minister there called the worst natural disaster ever to hit the country, with bridges collapsing and streams of mud overwhelming the highways. Austria, just north of Slovenia, was also struggling with overflowing waters, though its situation was not as dire. Norway and Sweden, on a lesser scale, were experiencing unusually heavy rainfall, too. In Italy, Portugal, Cyprus, and Greece, raging, out-of-control wildfires were the problem. Meanwhile, in Mesopotamia (the word means "land between two rivers"), the cradle of civilization—the Fertile Crescent—farmers are abandoning the whole area, because the surrounding waters are almost completely dried up. As it was the birthplace of civilization in the West, it is now the augur of its impending doom.

On the other side of the world in early August, China, arguably the cradle of civilization in the East, was inundated with rain in the region surrounding the capital of Beijing. The rain continued for days and was the heaviest downpour there since records started being kept 140 years before. Floodgates around Beijing were opened to drain the water from the capital into nearby towns and agricultural areas, where it destroyed the homes and businesses of Chinese citizens still smarting from Xi Jinping's draconian Covid-19 lockdown. John Kerry, the U.S. special presidential envoy for climate, had visited China (the world's biggest polluter) not long before to restart a dialogue on climate, but no agreement was reached. China's program calls for net zero emissions by the year 2060.

The greatest potential barrier to an effective global effort to combat climate change, however, is nested in an American institution, the Heritage Foundation. This think tank is devising a plan for America to abandon the use of alternative energy sources altogether and rely, as in the past, entirely on fossil fuels. The plan must assume the repeal by a Republican Congress of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which is set to spend $370 million on alternative energy technologies, mostly in Republican districts. The coming congressional and presidential elections have momentous implications for the future of planet Earth. TNR

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