Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

NOVEMBER 2022

Downstream of the Climate Crisis

Solmaz Daryani on ecological devastation in Iran

PLUS

James Chappel on how the Church became modern

Eileen Markey on the future of the Bronx

Eugene McCarraher on capitalism as idolatry

Mary Gordon on pregancy, abortion, and birth

$6.95 US/$7.50 CAN

COMMONWEALMAGAZINE.ORG

11

0 74470 81397 2

5 ways to connect with

Commonweal

Get the magazine and unlimited online access

Subscribe at
cwlmag.org/subscribe
or call **845.267.3068**

Get your student subscription

Free for anyone currently in college or recently graduated.
Visit **cwlmag.org/freestudent**

Help make *Commonweal*'s voice stronger

Support our mission with your tax-deductible donations at **cwlmag.org/donate** or call **212-662-4200 x5**

Sign up for our email newsletters

Delivered twice weekly, they take you right to the stories we're featuring.
Visit **cwlmag.org/newsletter**

Join the conversation

Connect with local readers and friends through a **Commonweal Local Community** or **the weal**.
Visit **cwlmag.org/communities**

@commonwealmag
@commonwealmagazine
@commonwealmagazine

Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

NOVEMBER 2022 • VOLUME 149 • NUMBER 10

COVER IMAGE
Solmaz Daryani

COVER DESIGN
David Sankey

Fishermen in the Hour Al-Azim wetland in Khuzestan Province, Iran.

Commonweal
FOUNDED IN 1924

Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of religion, politics, and culture, is published monthly, except for a single July-August issue, by the Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 244, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. Email: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 348, Congers, NY 10920-0348.

Commonweal articles are available at many libraries and research facilities via ProQuest and OpinionArchives. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices. Single Copy, U.S., $6.95; Canada, $7.95. Yearly print subscriptions, U.S., $69; Canada, $70; other parts of the world, $75. Special two-year rate: U.S., $108, Canada, $118, other parts of the world, $128. Add $45 for airmail.

LETTERS

Responses to the "Abortion After Dobbs" symposium

GOOD VERSUS GOOD

Commonweal's full reaction to the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* is one I have awaited eagerly, and your September symposium does not disappoint. Let me single out for special praise Cathleen Kaveny's illuminating legal analysis, most especially its conclusion, which begins, "A woman's bodily integrity and moral autonomy is a good. Protecting fetal life is a good. As polls show, many Americans are perplexed by abortion precisely because it is a question of good versus good, not good versus evil." Because these two absolute goods admit of no compromise in principle, compromise can only come in practice. The tragedy is that it almost did.

The *Dobbs* case was first filed in 2018. During the four years that separated the filing and the decision, the pro-choice and pro-life parties could have united behind a decision upholding the Mississippi law (legalizing abortion through the fifteenth week) but retaining *Roe* (with that adjustment only). The result would have made the legality of abortion within that three-and-a-half-month period irreversibly settled law. Alas, as Kaveny explains, this irenic compromise, barely mentioned through the years leading up to the decision, was supported in the end by Chief Justice Roberts but by him alone.

Let me register, finally, a small note of appreciation to Lisa Fullam for writing, "In keeping with the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, shouldn't these decisions be made by those closest to them: the pregnant woman, her partner, and the physician?" Perhaps I was reading quickly, but I believe that Fullam's is the only mention in the entire symposium of the rights, if any, of the father.

Jack Miles
Santa Ana, Calif.

'APPROPRIATE PENAL SANCTIONS'

Lisa Fullam raises several good points, especially the harm caused by lack of legal clarity. However, it is unrealistic to expect that the law will ever have enough clarity to address the many different circumstances of pregnancy. The law is a cudgel, ill-equipped to address the concerns and problems that arise in pregnancy. Using laws to make abortion illegal is like using a chain saw to perform surgery: the surgery may be a success, but the patient will likely die.

The Catholic Church teaches that abortions must be illegal and that people must be punished for them. Catechism #2273 mandates, "As a consequence of the respect and protection which must be ensured for the unborn child from the moment of conception, the law must provide appropriate penal sanctions for every deliberate violation of the child's rights." Many Catholics believe that the better solution to reduce abortions is to provide free contraception, sex education, health care, and child care. Yet Catholic teaching pushes for penal sanctions, imposing on each Catholic the obligation to support punitive legislation.

Fullam asserts that "*Dobbs* was not decided in order to enact Catholic magisterial teaching in the public square." While that may not have been the intent of the majority of (Catholic) justices in Dobbs, it is the practical effect. For many in Catholic leadership, the goal is to embed Catholic magisterial teaching into the judiciary and legislation. Catholic leaders have claimed that abortion is never necessary, is always immoral, and should be illegal. From a Catholic point of view, it is not enough that abortion is illegal; there must be punishment. And just what is "appropriate" punishment? For now, Catholic leadership insists that the pregnant person should not be punished, just everyone providing support. There is no reason to believe this. The Catholic agenda advanced by leadership is a nationwide ban at all stages

of pregnancy with no exceptions. As for "appropriate" punishment, in some states that includes imprisonment, and even the death penalty.

How should Catholics talk about abortion? Any conversation must honestly address Catechism #2273.

M. Toole
Beaverton, Oreg.

WHAT REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE IS

The editors in the introduction and David Cloutier in his contribution equated the reproductive-justice movement with the demand for carte blanche abortion access. The movement—begun by women of color three decades ago—actually embraces a position closer to Lisa Fullam's and Eve Tushnet's. It argues that reproductive freedom—the truly free choice to bear or not to bear children—requires reliable access to the social, economic, and medical resources to birth children safely and to raise them in a healthy, sustaining environment. Many women of color lack reliable access to these resources. This injustice curtails their reproductive freedom by making it impossible for them to give birth to and care well for the children they would otherwise like to have.

Access to abortion and contraception is one part of the reproductive-justice platform. But if we realized the full reproductive-justice vision, abortion rates would likely plummet.

Cristina L. H. Traina
Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ Chair in Catholic Theology
Fordham University, The Bronx, N.Y.

Commonweal welcomes letters to the editor. Letters can respond to both print and online articles, and should include your name, city, and state. Please send your submissions to letters@commonwealmagazine.org.

Irreconcilable Differences

How to describe the strange relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia? It has been variously called a "friendship," a "partnership," and—despite the lack of any formal security agreement—an "alliance." All these words tend to obscure the fact that this relationship has always been purely transactional, a matter not of shared values but of complementary interests. We needed their oil; they needed our guns, bombs, and warplanes. In 1943, less than a decade after Standard Oil discovered huge oil reserves in Saudi Arabia's eastern province, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that "the defense of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defense of the United States." That claim has remained the basis of U.S. policy ever since.

The special relationship between the two countries is perhaps best described as a marriage of convenience, one that has endured many trials: two Saudi-led wars with the State of Israel (also a "partner" of the United States); a Saudi-led oil embargo that triggered a decade of stagflation; the discovery that fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were Saudi nationals; and, more recently, the murder and dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul, reportedly approved by the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

In the wake of this last event, presidential candidate Joe Biden said he found "very little social redeeming value in the present government in Saudi Arabia," and promised that, as president, he would make the Saudi government an international "pariah." For a brief moment, it looked as if he would make good on that promise. Just weeks after being sworn into office, he ordered the release of a classified U.S. intelligence report that concluded Prince Mohammed had indeed ordered the assassination of Khashoggi. Grave consequences seemed to be in the offing. And then…nothing happened—no significant changes of policy toward Saudi Arabia, no sanctions on the crown prince, no real explanation of Biden's apparent change of heart.

And there was worse to come. In July, the president flew to Saudi Arabia and shared a fist bump with Prince Mohammed himself. Evidently, this seemingly casual gesture had been carefully choreographed, and was intended by the White House to signal something less than a full rapprochement. But the damage to Biden's credibility was done—one does not bump fists with a "pariah." Nor was this just a case of "bad optics"; the president now appeared willing to rehabilitate the Saudis only because he needed a favor from them. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the lingering effects of the global pandemic had reduced the world's fuel supply, increasing the price of gasoline in the United States. Biden sought, and thought he received, an assurance from the Saudis that they would increase their oil production in the fall. So, yes, the president may have abased himself, but at least it wasn't in vain. Cheaper gas was on the way.

That was the expectation until the first week of October, when the OPEC Plus oil cartel, led by Saudi Arabia and including Russia, decided to *cut* oil production by two million barrels a day—amounting to a 2 percent reduction in the world's total supply. The Saudis insisted that this was just a sober financial decision, not an insult or a betrayal: if they didn't cut supply soon, they claimed, the price of oil would soon fall too low, threatening their main source of revenue. If higher oil prices also helped Russia fund its war machine, that wasn't Saudi Arabia's fault, or its intention. Business was business.

This very public refusal to grant Biden's request made his fist bump in July look even worse, and he knew it. "There's going to be some consequences for what they've done with Russia," he promised. Other Democrats were more pointed. Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the second-ranking Democrat in the Senate, said it was "time for our foreign policy to imagine a world without this alliance with these royal backstabbers." Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, the chairman of the foreign-relations committee, called for a freeze "on all aspects of our cooperation with Saudi Arabia," while Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, who is introducing legislation that would stop U.S. arms sales to the Saudis, urged Biden to do more than just "re-evaluate" our current policy. "I would act immediately," Blumenthal said. "[Biden] has been misled and double-crossed, and I don't think he should or will take it lightly."

That remains to be seen. So far, at least, there have been no specific proposals and no timelines. It is possible that this latest outburst of tough talk will have as little practical effect as all the other expressions of outrage that U.S. presidents have resorted to whenever the House of Saud defied or embarrassed them. But it is also possible that the war in Ukraine will embolden Washington to finally shake free of this disgraceful and anachronistic "friendship." The problem is not just that the Saudis have disrespected and inconvenienced a U.S. president, or that Americans may have to pay more for gas as a result. The problem is also—and far more importantly—that Saudi Arabia is an enemy of democracy and a frequent violator of basic human rights, a country that stages mass executions and uses terrorism courts to prosecute its critics. Unlike its relationship with the United States, its friendship with Putin's Russia is much more than a marriage of convenience: it is a natural affinity between two authoritarian regimes. No president can credibly denounce one while bumping fists with the other. *October 20, 2022*

Rail Strike Looms, Again

On September 15, the Biden administration helped broker a deal between freight-rail carriers and the twelve unions that represent American rail workers. Touted as averting a potentially catastrophic strike, the deal was tentative, pending a series of votes by union members. On October 10, the third largest union involved, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE), rejected the deal by a vote of fifty-six to forty-three. Without a new deal by November 19, workers could walk off the job, leading to widespread disruptions to commerce and travel and costing the American economy as much as $2 billion per day.

The two sides are largely in agreement on pay. After three years without a raise, workers are set to earn a 24 percent increase over a five-year period under the tentative deal, terms consistent with those recommended by a Presidential Emergency Board in August. The major sticking points involve quality-of-life issues—including punitive attendance policies, understaffing, and safety—which the board left to negotiators to work out.

Under current attendance policies, workers are penalized for taking unscheduled time off due to illness or other emergencies. Union leaders initially asked for fifteen days of paid sick leave, but the tentative agreement provides just one. The deal also offers workers unpaid time off for three health-care visits, but only if scheduled thirty days in advance and on either a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. For many workers, who learned the details of the agreement well after President Biden announced it, these provisions are unacceptable. Jon Hauger, a conductor who works for BNSF, a railway owned by Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* that the new leave policy is "a complete joke." "You can't plan out 30 days in advance," he said. "It's offensive."

Rigid attendance policies are the result of changes to the industry's operational model that began in the 1990s. "Precision scheduled railroading," as the new model is dubbed, calls for fixed schedules (trains used to be held until a certain capacity was reached) and reduced maintenance and equipment costs. Freight trains have become longer—sometimes up to three miles—and sit for shorter periods of time. Meanwhile, the number of workers has dropped: trains formerly staffed by up to seven workers are now regularly staffed by just two. An analysis from More Perfect Union found that from 2001 to 2021 Union Pacific was able to cut 18,000 employees while increasing revenue by 85 percent.

The burden of the new model falls on the workers who remain. They typically work twelve-hour shifts, sometimes go several weeks without a day off, and are required to be on-call for long stretches of time. They also spend many nights on the road, with meager travel allowances—another sticking point in negotiations. One BSNF conductor told *VICE News*, "We have so little time off now that we have to parent our children via FaceTime. In order to discipline my children or console them when they're upset about something or why they never see me, I have to do it via FaceTime."

BMWE's vote against the deal came after four smaller unions had ratified it. Other rail unions will vote in the coming weeks. If just one union decides to go on strike, the rest will likely follow in solidarity. Under the Railway Labor Act, Congress does have the power to force a deal through over workers' objections, but that would require Democrats—still in control of both the House and the Senate until January—to abandon their averred support for unions at a moment when they can ill afford to lose more working-class voters.

—Alexander Stern

The Protests in Iran

"Woman, life, freedom!" On the streets of Iran, more than a month after the death of twenty-two-year-old Mahsa Amini, protesters in eighty-five cities chant their frustration with the government. Amini, a Kurdish woman who was on vacation in Tehran, was taken into custody by the Iranian "morality police" on September 13. Her hair was allegedly peeking out from behind her hijab, violating the mandatory dress code that requires women to completely cover their hair and the curves of their bodies. Some victims of the morality police get off with a verbal warning, while others are fined or beaten. Fellow detainees in the van with Amini claimed that security forces hit her head, likely causing the injuries that lead to her death. Later that day, she was rushed from the detention center to the hospital, where she lay in a coma. She died on September 16. Government officials claim, unconvincingly, that she suffered a heart attack from a preexisting condition.

Iran's morality police pose a constant threat—primarily, though not exclusively, to women. Iranian women have to worry about being arrested for the length of their robes, the style of their hair, or public displays of affection, but many also seek to fight the regime, inch by inch, by testing the limits of what they are allowed to do and wear. Following the 2021 election of conservative President Ebrahim Raisi, though, the hijab law has been enforced more harshly than ever. This only compounds the frustrations of daily life in a country where sanctions have devastated the economy, unemployment for young people is almost 25 percent, corruption runs rampant, and political opposition is met with censorship, arrest, or exile. While women and high-school-aged girls are at the forefront of the continuing protests—tearing off headscarves, chanting

and singing, and facing down riot police with incredible courage—women's rights are not their only concern. Protesters, including striking oil workers, also call for "death to the dictator," Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Khamenei and Raisi have responded with violent crackdowns, and protesters have sometimes fought back. Human-rights groups estimate that more than a hundred people around the country have died in the Amini protests, including at least twenty-three minors. The Iranian government blames the United States and Israel for inciting "chaos and terror." The heightened tensions between the West and Iran are undermining negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has reiterated its support for women in Iran and added new exceptions to sanctions, allowing licenses for software that helps Iranians on the internet communicate and maintain privacy. But this is only a partial solution, as the government has harshly curtailed internet access, forcing Iranians onto highly surveilled government-run platforms. This makes it difficult for protest organizers to coordinate, and for people inside the country to share their struggle with the outside world. It also accelerates the government's move toward replacing the global internet in Iran with a tightly controlled national intranet.

Because they lack a clear leader and are not associated with any particular party, the protests are hard to suppress, but also hard to translate into an effective political movement. For now, though, the protesters still have plenty of reasons to keep taking to the streets, reasons catalogued in their unofficial anthem, "Baraye." Drawing his lyrics from tweets from young Iranian protesters, songwriter Shervin Hajipour sings, "For my sister, your sister, our sisters…for the sunrise after long, dark nights." Iran's long dark night has lasted for more than forty years, despite many false dawns, but the country's women and young girls are still bravely marching forward, come what may.

—Isabella Simon

Musk Amok

Elon Musk is more than a tech mogul and the world's richest man. Even as he stirs things up on the American political scene, he's also making forays into geopolitics. The founder of SpaceX, CEO of Tesla, and soon-to-be owner of Twitter holds no official or honorary office but has an outsized personality and a compulsion to pronounce on matters both within and beyond his areas of expertise. He also has, at last check, an estimated net worth of $238 billion.

That buys him influence in global affairs. In October Musk asked his millions of online followers to approve a four-point plan for ending the war in Ukraine. His proposals resembled those often put forth by Russia, such as acknowledging the legitimacy of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and ceding Russian-occupied territories in the east. The "poll" went decisively against him, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky ridiculed the move. Piqued, Musk then suggested he'd pull out of an arrangement under which he'd been giving Ukraine free access to his Starlink satellite network. Ukraine has relied on network access not only for basic government functions but also for secure battlefield communications—something many credit for Ukraine's unexpected successes against the Russians. Musk publicly complained about high monthly "burn rate" (lost revenues), but then backed off his threat after Ukrainian appeals. "The hell with it," he wrote on Twitter. "Even though Starlink is still losing money & other companies are getting billions of taxpayer $, we'll just keep funding Ukraine govt for free." (Western governments do pay for the 20,000 Starlink terminals Ukraine needs to connect to the network.)

All this could be written off as the eccentric behavior of a rich entrepreneur if it didn't have such significant implications. Fiona Hill, former official at the U.S. National Security Council, acknowledged Musk's help to Ukraine in a recent *Politico* interview. But she also said that Vladimir Putin has leveraged Musk's popularity to short-circuit the diplomatic process. It's "very clear," Hill said, "that Musk is transmitting a message" for the Russian leader, delivering detailed talking points on topics he'd likely know little about himself. Putin recognizes a mark when he sees one, according to Hill, a skill honed over decades of dealing with Russian oligarchs: "[He] plays the egos of big men, gives them a sense that they can play a role."

Recently, Musk also weighed in on relations between China and Taiwan, suggesting in an interview with the *Financial Times* that Taiwan should be made a Special Administrative Region under Beijing's rule. The two governments could reach a "reasonably palatable" arrangement, he said, a remark that was criticized by Taiwan but praised by China's ambassador to the United States. Meanwhile, Musk has remained conspicuously quiet on China's human-rights record and restrictive censorship rules. Little surprise: Tesla is regularly setting new sales records in China, which, as journalist Matthew Yglesias points out, "is obviously only possible because the Chinese government lets Tesla sell cars there." But this, Yglesias adds, raises a different set of concerns: how the world's richest man will manage Twitter once he's in charge. Will Musk prohibit content critical of China (or other governments and leaders) even as he promises to loosen restrictions on offensive material, lift the ban on Donald Trump, and keep the platform politically neutral despite calling Democrats "the party of division and hate"? How social-media companies should balance content moderation against the right to free expression remains a hotly debated question with no obvious answers. In the meantime, Musk with his billions can afford to indulge his whims.

—Dominic Preziosi

JACOB LUPFER

All in Ron's Plans

Whether tweaking Trump or triggering libs, DeSantis knows just what he's doing.

Gov. Ron DeSantis speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Florida, February 24, 2022.

CNS PHOTO/OCTAVIO JONES, REUTERS

The only real question about the reelection of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on November 8 is what his margin of victory will be. The stronger DeSantis's showing against Democratic challenger Charlie Crist, the stronger his position to challenge a fellow Floridian for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

DeSantis seems to be on an unending political honeymoon, gaining ever greater national attention while triggering the libs and winning adulation from the fringe and mainstream precincts of the Right alike. Though his opponents despise him for the way he seems to wake up each day determined to be the biggest jerk possible, DeSantis remains broadly popular in Florida for keeping the economy going and schools largely open during the pandemic. His provocations annoy but they don't cost him support, even among moderate Sunshine State voters.

Among his more egregious stunts was the late-summer transport of Venezuelan migrants from South Texas to Martha's Vineyard. The move—at once cruel, cynical, and calculated—had nothing to do with Florida and everything to do with showing that he can exceed Trump-level nastiness in immigration rhetoric and policy. But DeSantis used funds appropriated by a budget Tallahassee Democrats voted for. And if his action is found to violate criminal law, he has sufficient degrees of separation to make underlings take the fall.

Florida Democrats lack anyone with the political talent (or shamelessness or gutter instincts) to push back forcefully against DeSantis, much less knock him down. The task has fallen occasionally to California Gov. Gavin Newsom, and occasionally to the Biden White House. But the most consequential, if less noticed, barbs come not from Sacramento or Washington but from Palm Beach. Donald Trump's inner circle complains to the national media about DeSantis, while the former president himself considers the governor insufficiently grateful for Trump's outsized role in elevating him from an underdog candidate in 2018 to a player on the national stage.

In 2018, DeSantis ran ads in which he used his own children to prove his devotion to Trump. The spots featured DeSantis reading *The Art of the Deal* to one child and teaching another to say "Build the wall" as they played with blocks. But since then, the governor has not prostrated himself before Trump the way other national Republicans have. After Hurricane Ian devastated southwest Florida in late September, whispers about DeSantis's mishandling of pre-storm evacuation procedures came from inside Mar-a-Lago before Democrats or the news media began to ask whether the governor should or could have done more.

But this only clarifies and reinforces DeSantis's political strength. While Crist briefly paused campaign activities after the storm, DeSantis enjoyed several news cycles being portrayed as a decisive, competent leader. He even served relief workers hash browns at a local Waffle House. And just when Democrats began to question publicly whether DeSantis should have evacuated more people out of Charlotte and Lee Counties before the storm, Biden arrived in Florida and promptly praised DeSantis for his crisis management, undercutting the line of attack Democrats had unwisely chosen. In covering DeSantis's make-nice with Biden, the media depicted him as a capable leader putting political differences aside in the wake of a natural disaster. DeSantis is a shrewd politician largely unconstrained by norms and ethics, and the distinction between campaigning and governing is almost always barely perceptible with him. Yet in his brightest national spotlight to date, he seemed statesmanlike alongside the president while Democrats' attacks floundered even more than usual.

DeSantis's daily routine generally involves picking fights with journalists in what he calls the "corporate media" or "regime media"; traveling around Florida cheering the disbursement of state and federal money regardless of whether he and Republicans supported its appropriation or not; and sending out email fundraising appeals hoping to monetize the latest outrage and pad his nine-figure campaign war chest with small-dollar contributions from angry Republicans all over the country.

Then there are moments when DeSantis turns his political skills against the man who made him. Such was the case when he keynoted the conservative conference circuit's Florida stops, where crowds seemed uncertain about which Florida man they had come to pay homage to. Such was the case in February at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando and in September at the National Conservatism conference in Miami. The audiences were obviously grateful to Trump, but they practically worshiped DeSantis, whom they consider to be like Trump, only better: more disciplined, less baggage, younger, smarter, better family life by far, no criminal investigations, etc.

And as some GOP candidates—all ebullient Trump disciples in their primaries—have kept the former president at a distance in their general-election campaigns, DeSantis received rock-star treatment at his fly-in rallies for Republican aspirants in Arizona, Nevada, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. He champions candidates who repeat Trump's lies about the 2020 election while never saying whether he thinks it was stolen. Billionaire GOP donors throw money at DeSantis as Trump subsists on PACs that end up paying his massive legal bills. While DeSantis is not a polished rhetorician or public speaker, his speeches are nonetheless clear and straightforward—a cross between a résumé and a high-school essay about the evils of the Left—while Trump's are more like delusional rants and televangelist altar calls. And Trump's tactics with respect to DeSantis fail to land much of a punch, let alone draw blood. Trump often complains that DeSantis copies his hand gestures, an undeniable accusation, but also petty. Late last year, Trump called the governor "gutless" for refusing to admit he got the vaccine booster as his wife, Casey, was receiving chemotherapy treatments at a cancer center during a Covid surge.

Still, it remains likely that Trump will make the first official moves toward a 2024 presidential run. He even teased the idea of making his campaign announcement in Tallahassee. DeSantis has downplayed presidential speculation, only declining to say he will not run if Trump does. If Trump did not run for some reason (criminal conviction, death), DeSantis would be poised to clear the field of Trump's more desperate imitators and hangers-on. But if the former president does run, as expected, DeSantis stands squarely in the way of a GOP coronation of Trump. DeSantis could also wait for Trump to stumble, or for his legal problems to mount, or for health and aging issues to sideline the former president, who will turn seventy-seven next June and would be seventy-eight if elected again. (Biden was seventy-seven when elected in 2020.) DeSantis also has time on his side: he would barely be fifty if he waited until 2028.

But as Republicans and the media continue to call attention to DeSantis's degrees from Yale and Harvard, a beautiful wife who beat cancer, cute young kids who are not spoiled and corrupt, and all the lib-triggering provocations that meet or exceed what Trump has said and done, Trump's envy will grow and even his most ardent supporters may find DeSantis a more attractive option. And then national Democrats will get the opponent they might least like to face.

JACOB LUPFER *is a political strategist and writer in Jacksonville, Florida.*

President Biden at a cabinet meeting, Washington D.C., November 2021

CNS PHOTO/KEVIN LAMARQUE, REUTERS

ANTHONY ANNETT

After Neoliberalism

'Bidenomics,' explained

A decade ago it was common to hear Republicans complaining about "Obamanomics," but the term conveyed little meaning. "Bidenomics," by contrast, does indeed describe a coherent set of economic policies that differ in substantial ways from what came before.

President Obama's crowning economic achievement was the recovery from the global financial crisis—at the time the sharpest downturn since the Great Depression. But Obama relied far too heavily on the neoliberal playbook. He showed little appetite for challenging the dominance of market thinking or indeed the power and position of the financial sector. His solution was to shore up the large financial institutions that caused the crisis by making sure they had enough capital. He made no effort to bail out the ordinary homeowners who suffered immensely from the greed of Wall Street. As a result, more than 9 million families lost their homes. Unemployment stayed too high for too long. Peaking at 10 percent of the labor force at the end of 2009, it took until the latter half of 2015 to fall to 5 percent. And 95 percent of the income gains in the three years after the financial crisis went to the top 1 percent.

The extent of the problem was laid bare by economists Atif Mian and Amir Sufi in their book, *House of Debt*. They showed that the real problem was less financial fragility than excessive household debt, which held back spending and led to job losses. This, in their view, was what really caused the deep recession. The key point is that the architects of the Obama strategy misdiagnosed the problem as a lack of confidence in the financial sector, so they focused on protecting bankers and creditors rather than addressing deep-rooted problems in the real economy. A crisis that should have occasioned a radical reappraisal of neoliberal thinking instead led to its further entrenchment.

The doctrines of neoliberalism rose to prominence with the Reagan Revolution in the early 1980s. Simply put, neoliberalism taught that what matters most in an economy is efficiency and growth, and

that those are best achieved by unlocking the dynamism of the private sector. All impediments to this dynamism need to be removed, especially where the state is involved. Accordingly, neoliberals pushed for low taxes, deregulation, privatization, a paring back of the welfare state, and an unshackled financial sector. As I argue in my book *Cathonomics*, neoliberalism largely failed even on its own terms: it did not deliver rising productivity and long-term economic growth. It also left massive inequality and major social and political upheaval in its wake. But its elegant simplicity seduced a lot of people. As the 1990s progressed, neoliberalism spread far and wide, across the world and across the aisle. In the United States, Presidents Clinton and Obama both failed to challenge its hegemony.

But things have begun to change. In his approach to economic policy, President Biden has broken with the neoliberal paradigm in substantial ways. A distinctive "Bidenonomics" can be recognized in five different areas: Keynesian demand management, pro-family social policy, infrastructure spending, industrial policy, and actions to push the energy transition.

In the 1930s, John Maynard Keynes argued that governments could get the economy out of recession by replacing private with public demand. Since recessions were typically caused by a fall in private consumption and investment, the government could step in to temporarily take up the slack. This Keynesian demand management proved successful in the postwar era, managing to smooth out economic fluctuations and reduce the pain felt by ordinary people. But it fell out of fashion in the 1970s because of stagflation—the combination of high unemployment with high inflation.

With the Biden presidency, Keynesian demand management has come roaring back. Shortly after Biden's election in 2021, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act. This injected $1.9 trillion of extra spending and lower taxes into the economy. It featured items like enhanced unemployment benefits and a child tax credit, but its signature policy involved sending $1,400 checks to qualifying households. Here was an attempt to directly protect ordinary people from the Covid recession and, in doing so, kick-start the economy. And in this it succeeded: employment growth has been spectacular, and unemployment is at a five-decade low of 3.5 percent. Contrast this with the much more tepid stimulus introduced by Obama in 2009. While it was probably all that could be done in the political climate of that time, the Obama stimulus—about $831 billion spread over ten years—proved insufficient to pull the economy out of recession quickly. Apart from its size, its composition was also a problem: it relied too much on tax cuts, which tend to deliver less effective stimulus.

Of course, when you run the economy hot, as Biden has, the big risk is inflation. And inflation is indeed what we got. At 8.2 percent, it's at a forty-year high. But we shouldn't read too much into this. Much of the inflation reflects supply bottlenecks arising from the unusual shutdown of the global economy in the wake of the Covid pandemic. More recently, some of it reflects rising energy and food prices caused by Russia's war in Ukraine. But the American Rescue Plan Act probably did contribute to inflation. The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco estimated that fiscal stimulus added 3 percentage points to price increases. That's not a huge jump in the grand scheme of things. I would argue that it is an acceptable price to pay for an economy that works well for workers—ample jobs and rising wages. The lesson from the Obama era is clear: it is better to err on the side of too much stimulus than on the side of too little. And now that the economy is strong again, the Keynesian response would be to withdraw fiscal support—as the Inflation Reduction Act does by reducing the deficit.

The second area of Bidenomics is pro-family social policy. Last year, President Biden proposed a $1.8 trillion American Families Plan—a key plank of his Build Back Better agenda. The centerpieces of this plan were subsidized childcare, universal pre-kindergarten, paid family leave, free community college, and a child tax credit. It would be fully paid for by raising taxes on the wealthy, so that it wouldn't increase the deficit and add to the already-large fiscal stimulus. But this is the one area of Bidenomics that has failed—at least so far. Biden was unable to muster the entire Democratic caucus behind this expansive initiative—or to get a single Republican to vote for it. That's a real shame. Such a pro-family agenda would mark a return to the poverty-fighting policies that have been in abeyance during the neoliberal era. The brief experiment with a child tax credit in the American Rescue Plan Act managed to reduce child poverty by 40 percent. More broadly, the American Families Plan would fill in major gaps in the welfare state and help people navigate the growing challenges of balancing work and family in the modern era. Unlike neoliberal anti-poverty programs, which rely heavily on paltry but stigma-inducing means-tested benefits and work requirements, these new benefits would be both more universal and less conditional, which would also likely make them more popular.

The third area of Bidenomics addresses infrastructure. In the original Build Back Better agenda, the "hard" infrastructure of building things would stand beside the "soft" infrastructure of protecting families. But while the American Families Plan went nowhere in Congress, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act passed and was signed into law earlier this year. This $1.2 trillion package is centered on building and renovating roads, bridges, ports, railways, public transport, airports, power, broadband, clean-water infrastructure, and a network of chargers for electric vehicles. It shouldn't be controversial for the government to build things that the private sector can't or won't. Such investments will pay off down the line as the productive capac-

ity of the economy is strengthened. Yet while the United States made major investments in public infrastructure from the New Deal onwards, this too has been on hold in the neoliberal area—based on the belief that the public sector is sclerotic and inefficient, and because the zeal for ever-larger tax cuts starved the government of funds. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act marks a new departure and should pay major dividends in the years ahead.

That brings us to industrial policy, the fourth part of Bidenomics. Industrial policy refers to taxes, subsidies, or regulations designed to stimulate specific industries or sectors of the economy. This is a no-no for neoliberals, who assume that a government attempting to "pick winners" interferes with free-market efficiency. Yet industrial policy has a long and venerable history. The Department of Defense developed what became the internet, President Kennedy's "moonshot" created the space industry and associated space science, and the Human Genome Project was a government-sponsored program to sequence the human genome (which proved essential in developing recent vaccines). More generally, as economist Mariana Mazzucato has noted, a lot of modern innovation—including the internet but also smartphone technology and new drugs—comes not from the magic of the market but from public-sector research. We can also see the success of industrial policy in other parts of the world—most notably East Asia, where a private sector aided and stimulated by government policies led to rapid development. This explains much of China's recent economic success.

So far, President Biden's forays into industrial policy have been halting and tentative. The most prominent example has been the CHIPS and Science Act, a $280 billion package that offers subsidies and tax credits to companies that make computer chips in the United States and sets aside funds for scientific research in areas such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and quantum computing. For political reasons, the package has been promoted as a matter of national security—allowing us to onshore vital computer components so that we won't be so reliant on geopolitical rivals, especially China—but the industrial-policy dimension of the CHIPS and Science Act will be more important in the long run. It remains to be seen whether it will be expanded in the years ahead. All we can say for now is that an important precedent has been set.

The fifth component of Bidenomics is the effort to promote the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. This is the centerpiece of the Inflation Reduction Act—a $369 billion package of subsidies and tax credits designed to stimulate renewable energy infrastructure, electrification, more energy-efficient homes and businesses, and the sale of electric vehicles. All told, these provisions are expected to lower greenhouse-gas emissions by 40 percent by 2030 (from 2005 levels), which makes the Inflation Reduction Act the most ambitious set of climate policies in U.S. history. Needless to say, achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050—the target established by the Paris Agreement—is the most important policy goal over the next three decades. And the Inflation Reduction Act puts us well on our way.

This, too, is a marked departure from the neoliberal era, which did little to avert climate change. It was partly because of how neoliberals viewed carbon emissions—mainly as a pricing problem. The price of carbon just needed to be increased to account for its true social cost. That would automatically create the right incentives to spur clean-energy investment. But this carbon-pricing logic missed an important political calculation. All across the world, rising energy prices would frequently be met by public uprisings and political instability. Relying on carbon pricing was never going to work, but a blind devotion to this strategy stalled the climate agenda for decades. By getting past this neoliberal obsession with "correct pricing" and instead using industrial policy to promote renewable energy, the Inflation Reduction Act puts decarbonization on a more politically sustainable path.

Taken together, the different elements of Bidenomics mean a greater role for the state. Some of Bidenomics is about protecting more people from the vagaries of modern capitalism by filling out the welfare state. But much of it—infrastructure, industrial policy, and climate action—works on the supply side, seeking to build out the productive capacity of the economy to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Estimates suggest that these three supply-side initiatives could create 30 million jobs over the next ten years.

But Bidenomics, despite its considerable achievements, remains an unfinished agenda. It remains to be seen whether the president can ever muster enough support for his pro-family policies. Much will depend on whether the Democrats lose control of Congress in the midterms. We can see a thin sliver of light through the tiniest of cracks as some on the pro-life political Right are now rallying around the need to provide low-income women with adequate health care and support for their children. Meanwhile, many on the "New Right" are less averse to industrial policy than their forebears. But there is unfortunately little appetite for broader social-democratic protections within a Republican Party that remains in the grip of neoliberalism. Perhaps that will change one day, but probably not soon.

One final point: I would argue that an up-to-date vision of social democracy would go even further than Bidenomics does. It would push for stronger collective-bargaining protections and workplace democracy, as well as substantially more progressive taxation. But for this more radical agenda to gain traction, we would need to see a complete break with neoliberalism. For now, Bidenomics marks an important step in the right direction. It is likely to be this president's defining legacy.

ANTHONY ANNETT *is an adjunct professor at Fordham University and a senior advisor at the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. He is the author of* Cathonomics: How Catholic Tradition Can Create a More Just Economy *(Georgetown University Press, 2022).*

HELP HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS *TAKE THEIR* NEXT MOST FAITHFUL STEP

YOUTH THEOLOGY NETWORK

- Resources for and by leaders helping high school youth discover their purpose
- 100+ vocational discernment programs to help students explore their call
- Impact stories to remind you why this work matters

LIKE YOU, **YTN IS DEDICATED TO SEEING STUDENTS LIVE OUT THEIR PURPOSE, PASSION AND CALLING.**

CONNECT WITH US TO LEARN HOW WE CAN PARTNER TOGETHER TO SUPPORT THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS.

The Youth Theology Network (YTN) is a coordinated initiative between the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) and the LIlly Endowment Inc.

youththeologynetwork.org

This Pregnancy

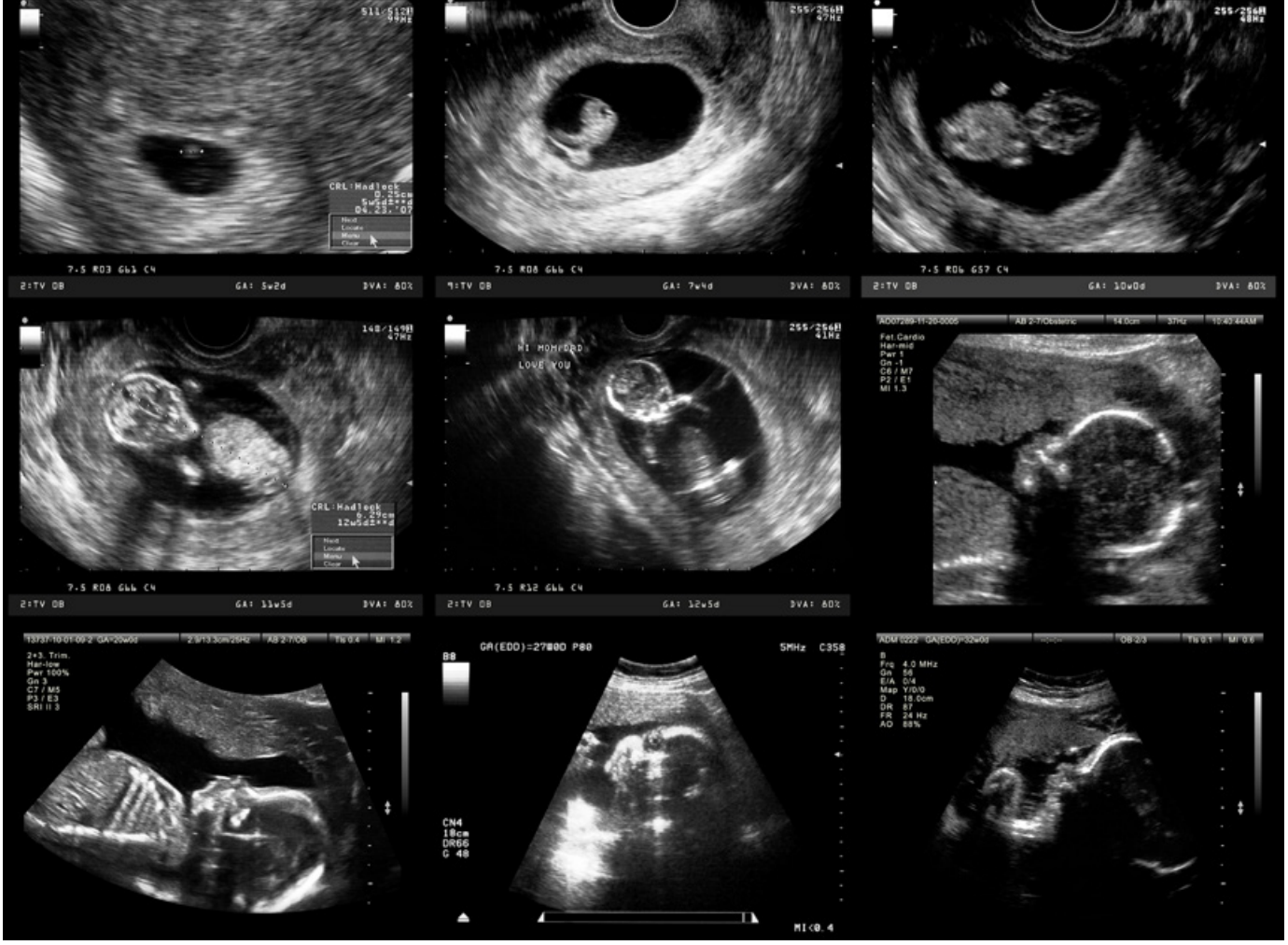
Mary Gordon

Each one is different.

Editor's Note: The September issue of Commonweal *featured a symposium titled "Abortion After Dobbs." The magazine has been publishing a series of articles and essays that continue the conversation begun in the symposium. This is the second in that series.*

If I believed a fetus was a baby, I would be the most ardent of ardent anti-abortionists. But I do not, and it is something to which I have given serious thought for many decades. Perhaps it is the fault of the pro-choice movement, inherent in our name, "pro-choice," that anti-abortionists assume that people like me brush aside the nature of a fetus as one of those pesky questions with which we needn't concern ourselves. The issue of abortion is emotionally fraught. Like all emotionally fraught questions, it can lead to a crude projection of the other, a blunting of argument, a refusal of nuance.

I realize that my position on abortion is strongly influenced by my personal experience. I don't believe that personal experience is an inviolate source of authority, vulnerable as it is to the distortions of which the human mind is capable, the all-too-human tendency to want to justify ourselves and to silence difficult objections. But ethical decisions can only be made in the light of experience; to assume the opposite is its own kind of distortion. It cannot but rankle that the male celibate hierarchy of the Catholic Church, my Church, has a disproportionate influence on the question of abortion, which could not be further from their experience.



Ultrasounds showing fetal development at various stages of pregnancy

URSAHOOGLE/GETTY IMAGES

I have been pregnant five times, and intimately involved in two pregnancies not my own. My experiences of pregnancy have led me to a conclusion that has not been stated clearly or often. The word "pregnancy" must always be preceded by the definite article *this*.

My first pregnancy occurred when I was nineteen. I was a sophomore in college, thrilled with my life at the college of my dreams. I was a scholarship girl; my father had died twelve years earlier, my mother had only a high-school education.

It was the day after Thanksgiving, and I went to see the movie *Camelot* with a group of friends. The fate of Guinevere and Arthur, superbly played by Vanessa Redgrave and Richard Harris, had broken my heart and I wept uncontrollably leaving the theater. My date, feeling the need to comfort me, invited me to his apartment. Comfort led to what was then known as heavy petting. We did not have intercourse, and I didn't know then that intercourse was not required for impregnation. I missed my period, but I couldn't imagine that I was pregnant. I consulted a gynecologist. He told me that in fact I was ten weeks pregnant. Seeing my shock and horror, he informed me that if I could come up with $2,000, he could arrange for a psychiatrist to write a letter asserting that I was suicidal and therefore an abortion was required. There was no way I could come up with $2,000. The only money I had was the $500 I had saved from my summer job. I would literally rather have died—I knew I was risking my life—than tell my mother, and even if I had, the yearly salary she earned as a secretary was $8,200. I remember the exact figure because of having to fill it in on scholarship forms.

I knew that having a baby would mean the end of the life I had worked so hard to begin. The shame that would have fallen on me and my mother was too unbearable even to contemplate. Panicked, I asked everyone I knew where I could get an abortion, which was illegal at the time. I got a number from one of my classmates.

I phoned it and was given a date. I was told to come alone and stand in front of a movie theater in the Bronx. At the assigned time, a car pulled up and a man honked the horn for me to enter. He told me to sit in the back seat, got out of the car, came around to me and put a blindfold around my eyes. He drove in what seemed like circles and then stopped the car. Still blindfolded, I was led by him to the basement of an apartment whose location I had no way of knowing.

He removed the blindfold only when I was inside. The room was small and anonymous; a fluorescent light on the ceiling buzzed. Several women were seated on salmon-colored plastic chairs. One by one, they disappeared into a room and after a time walked out, looking white and shaken. I was the last to be called. A man in a white jacket, who spoke no English, offered me a Darvon, a mild painkiller. I got on the table, and the excruciating procedure began.

This creature inside me who had not yet moved was not the same order of being as the child to whom I had given birth, whom I held in my arms, and nursed at my breast.

Then the man who drove me blindfolded me again and left me back in front of the Bronx theater.

I was still living at home, not having the money for a dorm room, so a friend let me sleep in her room that night. She held me in her arms as I wept from the memory of the pain and the awareness that I could have died. I was also angry that if I'd had more money, I would not have had to put myself in danger. But not for a moment did I regret what I had done.

The gynecologist who had offered me the psychological loophole said that I could come and see him afterwards to make sure there were no complications. He told me that I was fine and warned me that I seemed to be unusually fertile and should be aware of the implications of that.

In 1974, I was twenty-five and enrolled in a PhD program. I was involved with a man who seemed just right: we were both ferociously intellectual, passionately literary, the stars of our separate graduate programs. We shared the same politics and taste in painting and music. Most important, we were both involved in progressive religious movements, he as a Jew and I as a Catholic. A few days after he had gone back home after what I thought had been a lovely weekend, I got a letter from him saying that he couldn't be involved with me anymore because I wasn't Jewish. I shot back a terse, bitter reply: "Did that just occur to you?" The next week I discovered that I was pregnant, although I had carefully used a diaphragm. I knew that I wanted to have an abortion; I knew that I very much wanted to have children, but not in this way, and not at this time. I saw that the path to a career as a writer and college teacher would be greatly complicated, if not rendered impossible, if I had a baby. The child of a single mother, I knew the costs on both sides. Complicating things was that my mother was descending daily into further depths of alcoholism and depression; I had become her mother and I knew the effects of her finding out about my pregnancy would be devastating.

I went to my local Planned Parenthood. Everyone was more than kind; I was tested and found to be nine weeks along. I wrote to my former lover, informing him. He was remorseful and said he would help me pay for an abortion. I informed him that Planned Parenthood only charged $200 and he needn't bother. He sent me $100 the next day.

The Planned Parenthood facility was welcoming, clean, and cheerful. The friend who accompanied me was invited to stay until the procedure was done. I was given an anesthetic; the doctor explained the procedure. I will remember the wonderful nurse all my life. She was probably in her sixties, small, compact, with tight gray curls and a reassuring touch. "I was retired," she said, "but I came back to work because I wanted to be part of the new world, where women could have abortions safely. When I was a student nurse, there were so many botched abortions that some smart-alecky young doctors referred to the place where the women were treated as 'the septic tank.'"

I experienced only mild discomfort, was given medication in case any more discomfort ensued, provided with a number I could call at any time, and given an appointment for the next day. My friend took me home and I spent the night in her apartment. Certainly, I wished that what had happened had not happened, but I never thought I had made the wrong decision.

The doctor whom I saw the next day assured me that I would have no trouble getting pregnant in the future.

In December 1979 I was joyously married to a man I deeply loved. We were very eager to have children, and our joy was boundless when in January of 1980, I became pregnant. I loved being pregnant and was fortunate that everything went smoothly after the first three months of morning sickness. At that time, I was determined to have a drug-free delivery, but after twenty-two hours of labor, I agreed to an epidural and at last gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

I can say without reservation or hesitation that it was the greatest moment of my life. I remember the first moments alone with my new baby in the recovery room; it was quiet and dark after the noise and bustle of the delivery room and I felt brimming over with peaceful love…and the strangeness that this creature that had lived inside my body was now a citizen of the world, about to begin her own life. I whispered to her, "Welcome to the world, my love," and tears came as freely, as effortlessly, as uncontrollably as sweat, so grateful was I for the miracle in which I had somehow participated.

When my daughter was a year old, a neighbor, someone I knew only slightly, called me weeping. She said she thought she was having a miscarriage—she had learned only that week that she was nine weeks pregnant—but that she wasn't sure: blood and something else came gushing from her and not knowing what else to do, she sat on the toilet.

She had always seemed fragile to me, overwhelmed by everything in her life. She was small and slender with strawberry blonde hair and large green eyes. Her husband was an electrical engineer, but his real passion was bodybuilding. She had a black German shepherd who strained on his leash when she walked him; I feared he could knock her over any minute. Her house seemed too big for the furniture in it; I felt like I was in *Alice in Wonderland* when I walked into the living room.

She was still sitting on the toilet when I arrived, and I took her to bed and wrapped her in towels and blankets. "I have to ask you an enormous favor," she said. "I think what I passed was a fetus but I'm not sure…and I need to find out from the doctor whether I'm still carrying a fetus or whether it's gone. This is going to be unpleasant, but I need you to do it. Take what is in the toilet and bring it to the doctor with me."

I felt I couldn't refuse her, although I was hesitant about the prospect of fishing bloody matter from a toilet. But having dealt with my mother's and grandmother's illness and affliction from my early years, I knew I could do it. I felt great pride when a close friend said of me, "You're the one people call if they have to go to the emergency room."

I took a cup and scooped what I could into it. Floating in the bloody water was something gelatinous around the size of a large postage stamp. Was this the fetus? I couldn't know. It seemed so much more like the kind of heavy period I'd sometimes had than anything like a human child that I was tempted to flush it down the toilet. But I obeyed my friend's wishes.

The doctor told us that it was in fact a fetus, that she had miscarried, and would need procedures to remove whatever remains she was still carrying. "Do you want to take it home?" the doctor asked, and my friend looked at him in anger and said, "Of course not…please dispose of it in any way that you normally do."

I was surprised at how tender her husband was when we got home; I hadn't credited him as someone with much tenderness. But although they were Catholic, they had no impulse to bury, to baptize, to name what had been lost, which was, whatever else it was, obviously not a child. I wondered why the Catholic Church, so insistent on the personhood of all fetuses, didn't require burial or baptism.

In July of 1982, I became pregnant again, and once again my husband and I were thrilled at the prospect. In mid-November, I was pushing my daughter in a stroller on my way to the health-food store when my water broke. I was eighteen weeks pregnant. I was rushed to the hospital and put on complete bed rest, hoping that the amniotic sac would reseal itself and I could hold on to the pregnancy. For ten days, I lay on my back in the hospital, unmoving with a stillness of which I wouldn't have believed myself capable, terrified that if I turned or lifted my arm the wrong way, I would cause a miscarriage. Despite my best efforts, I went into early labor at nineteen-and-a-half weeks. My husband was beside me for it all; I asked him to look at the fetus and tell me what it was like. He said, "It was very tiny…it was like a baby but not like a baby. All I could think of was how pathetic it looked, how unable for life."

I felt a greater despair than I had ever experienced. I felt a failure as a woman, that I had failed this creature whom only I had known, and that, even though I had not felt it move, I had known it as the most intimate possible inhabitant of my body. It was the last time I prayed with any faith that my prayers would be answered. It was the last time I felt safe or protected in or by the universe.

Part of the great difficulty was that I did not know what I was mourning. I was angry when someone sent me a condolence card on the loss of a baby because this creature inside me who had not yet moved was not the same order of being as the child to whom I had given birth, whom I held in my arms, and nursed at my breast.

As soon as I was able, three months after the late miscarriage, I tried to get pregnant again, and in the first month of trying, I did. I could not possibly experience the same easy pleasure as I had when I was pregnant with my daughter, and when, in the fourth month, I began spotting, I was seized with terror. We were on vacation in Cape Cod, and I went to Boston to see an obstetrician who was a colleague of the wonderful man who had delivered my daughter and been present at the loss of the second pregnancy. The Boston doctor determined that I had what was called "an incompetent cervix," and suggested a procedure where a stitch would be put in to tighten the cervix. My New York doctor disagreed, and I waited in great anxiety while they debated the proper course, finally opting for bed rest and no invasive procedure. Once again, I lay dreading the dire consequences of any false move, but in fact I carried to term and gave birth to my son—although the cord was around his neck, and he required a forceps delivery in the course of which my vaginal walls were nicked, and I had to be wheeled to another room to be stitched up. So it was only after that recovery that my little boy was brought to me and the same sense of miracle, of unspeakable love, was mine.

In 2010, my daughter called to tell us she was pregnant, and I literally danced around the house for joy. But the pregnancy was troubled, and I stayed with her as, like me, she had to lie still to forestall miscarriage. But miscarriage occurred, and it was a grievous time for her and her husband, but also my husband and me.

Luckily she inherited the genes for fertility that all the women in my family seem blessed with, and soon she was pregnant again. No one who has miscarried can ever be entirely free of worry during a pregnancy, and I kept reassuring her that everything would be fine. But I wished that I had had the ability to pray for something specific, an ability I lost when I had the miscarriage at nineteen weeks.

At twelve weeks, she emailed us a sonogram of a healthy boy. We put it up on our refrigerator, and as I obsessively looked at it, I tried to understand what it was that I was looking at. It had the shape of a baby, but it was faceless, featureless—like a space creature swimming in its capsule. It occurred to me that, as it was featureless, I would not be able to tell it from any other fetus of the same age, and yet I kissed it every time I passed the refrigerator. I knew I was kissing an image only…but of what? An image of potential, whose actuality seemed alien and strange. My daughter is a doctor, and I asked her what she thought this being was, and she said: "Give it up, Mom. It's unknowable and anyone who thinks they know is indulging their own fantasy."

I am the grandmother of two splendid grandsons, brimming joy in a new key. I would, in a second, give my life for either of them.

I can imagine someone reading this who is firmly committed to the idea that a child is a child from the moment sperm meets egg, saying: "Very nice, very moving, but it's only her experience…too little to resolve anything."

So, I have tried over the years to address the problem not only from my own experience but using the kind of rational thought I would apply to any ethical question.

This is particularly vexed with abortion because there is no analogy for it; the attempts at analogy are seriously flawed, the most common being the analogy of murder. There are two important reasons for this. One is the problem of procreation: in no other human act is the gap between cause and effect so radical. The act of sex, performed for pleasure, lasts minutes; the commitment to a child is lifelong. And there is no other act whose moral valence changes over time.

I was lucky to be able to discuss this in great depth with someone whose scientific knowledge I could trust. Among the greatest of good fortunes in my life was my meeting the woman who would become my best friend on the first day of high school. We spoke to each other every day for fifty-six years, until her untimely death at sixty-nine of breast cancer. She was beside me at the birth of both my children. She was a woman of extraordinary accomplishment, board-certified in pediatrics, cardiology, and anesthesiology. One of her fields of expertise was pain in children. She was enraged at what she called the "junk science" of doctors who claimed that a first-trimester fetus could feel pain. She explained to me over many conversations, including sharing many images with me, that these doctors with anti-abortion agendas were confusing a fetus's ability to respond to stimulus with the ability to process pain. All multicellular animals, most of them invertebrates, can respond to stimuli. The fetus is unable to do more than respond to stimuli until the end of the second trimester, at which time it begins to be capable of initiating movement. This was the consensus of the scientists she considered trustworthy. She reminded me that it is impossible to replicate the situation of a first-trimester fetus in the womb.

I will admit to having reservations about late-term abortion, but none at all about those occurring in the first trimester, and I understand that this renders me vulnerable to the anti-abortionist question: How do you draw the line, medical advances making it possible for younger and younger fetuses to survive outside the womb? Late abortions, however, even second-trimester abortions, are the rarity, and many second-trimester abortions occur because of the difficulty of obtaining a first-trimester abortion or for serious medical reasons. Why put a law in place when the reasons for it do not apply to most cases, when it would in fact harm the majority of people whom it would affect?

Anti-abortion people are correct when they say that abortion is a serious issue. It raises large questions: What is it to be human? Do we always believe that life, by the simple virtue of being alive, is desirable? But really, we know that the answer is no. Who among us has never said, in relation to a death that ended a painful life: "It's a blessing"?

They believe they are holding up the idea of life as an absolute good, and that pro-abortion people are taking away the idea of an absolute good. If we can't say that life is an absolute good, where are we to look for absolute good? I would suggest that we consider that it is an absolute good to act to avoid or to prevent suffering. With this in mind, shouldn't we examine what we know causes suffering, rather than focusing on what is unknowable?

We know that it is not a good thing for a woman to bear a child when she doesn't want it. That bringing a child into an environment that cannot well support it has grave consequences for the child and its family. That throughout history, women have often died or experienced irreparable bodily harm from illegal abortion. That states that have banned abortion—Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa—have not been morally admirable, and that states with the greatest concern for the well-being of their citizens have made abortion available and safe.

And we know that women with strict ethical principles have had abortions. I remember inviting four women, all in their eighties, for lunch. One was a survivor of Communist tyranny, the career of another was finding placement for refugees, the third had devoted her life to a mentally-challenged son, and the fourth was a mother of five. All of them had had abortions, but being upper-middle-class, their abortions were safely performed by doctors they trusted. They assured me that many of their friends had done the same.

The chances are good that women who have had abortions are reluctant to reveal that they have, so pervasive is the stigma attached to it, so frightening are some of the responses from radical anti-abortionists.

I know this reluctance very well. It took me fifty-three years to get over it.

MARY GORDON *is the author of eighteen books, including* Final Payments, Joan of Arc: A Life, Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels, *and most recently the novel* Payback.

Four Poems by Rex Wilder

NOT A WEEK GOES BY

Not a week goes by in treat-
Ment without my wondering
How I became that creep,
A kind of solo lover blundering

Through the human showroom
Desperate to experience
His life any way but alone,
His unintentional prurience

A source of shame. A glint
Of sun flashes from a window
Four floors up. We can't
See inside from this far below.

MOTHER BIRDS

We were like mother birds
feeding other mother birds.
But perhaps the saddest story
was the society woman who
stopped believing in herself;
she never stopped thanking
me for the lantern I carried
in my eyes, then died swinging
like a censer. Despite my own
limits, my friends had me
thinking I'm a guardian angel
myself. Maybe we all are.

FOUR MOONS

There are eleven moons, I'm told,
New moon through old,
As there were eleven suicides,
Failures all, still alive,
Walking up & down my ward.
Being a moon is hard.

Being a moon is hard,
Having to be starred
Yet making the heavens faint;
A single coat of black paint
That barely lasts the night.
A moon has an appetite.

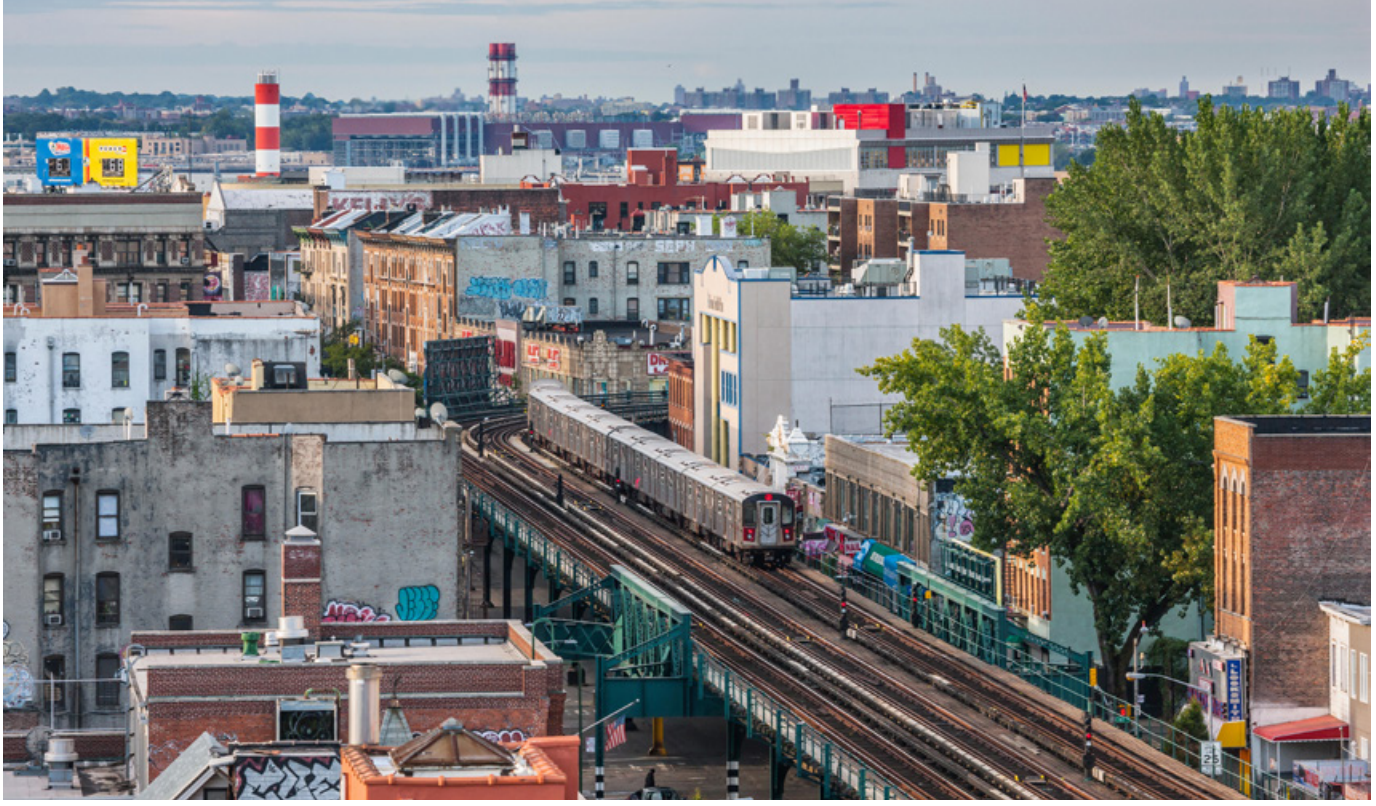
A moon has an appetite.
Without a mooring in sight
It yearns for a familiar
Anchor on Earth, a streetcar
To ride on, a cul de sac—
A woman with a moon-hat!

A woman with a moon-hat
At the window, I remember *that.*
Doctors sautéed her brain.
She became a fixture; a ribbon
Of pain shone blue in her hair.
The moon is beyond repair.

SPENDING LIES

But then one recovers, as do the objects
Of one's affection. As in covering
Again. Can recovery be a bad thing?
Side effects: the blight of blasé,
A mild fever of yeah, whatever.
I guess I'm still loving everything
But having to *remind* myself; my mind-
Ful calm's not sticky anymore.
The thrill isn't gone. It's just shopping
With coupons, putting things back.

REX WILDER *has been published in* Poetry, *TLS (London), the* New Republic, National Review, *the* Nation, Harvard Review, *the* Yale Review, Poetry Ireland, *and others, plus many anthologies, most recently* Together in a Sudden Strangeness *(Knopf). He has also published three full-length books with Red Hen Press and Chatwin Books. His newest work,* Wilder Venice, *is forthcoming this winter, featuring original photographs complemented by prose reflections.*



Southern Boulevard in the Bronx

Who Will Save The Bronx?

Eileen Markey

Can't Breathe

In the spring of 2020, the ambulance sirens never stopped wailing in the Bronx. Covid galloped through the borough, a sub-city of 1.4 million people, claiming 150 lives a day that April. Montefiore Hospital, the borough's biggest hospital—and one of its major employers—turned every unused space over to Covid patients. North Central Bronx, the public hospital next door, lined them up in the hallways. City government made plans for a field hospital in Van Cortlandt Park, sandbags stacked at the edge of the famous cross-country course. After years of austerity budgets and efficiency consultants, both hospitals had far fewer beds than Covid demanded. An informal network of nurses maintained a text chain monitoring which area hospitals were accepting patients and which were turning them away. Montefiore brought in a trailer-sized supplemental oxygen tank to feed the many respirators pumping away inside—and refrigerator trucks for the bodies of those for whom the respirators were not enough. The morgue had far exceeded capacity.

NINO MARCUTTI/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The daily number of reported positive cases that spring peaked at 1,300, exacerbated by the cramped housing conditions in which tens of thousands of Bronxites live; by the fact that the borough, New York's last refuge for the working class and poor, was filled with Black and Latino service-industry workers who didn't have the option of working from home; and by the underlying chronic respiratory conditions that have long plagued the people of the Bronx, where highways run even through the parks. As workplaces shuttered and jobs in the informal economy disappeared, food pantries and soup kitchens were overwhelmed. By June, tens of thousands were receiving food assistance and lines at distribution sites—schools, churches, community centers—snaked around the block. In time, the pandemic would extract a heavy toll from communities all across the country and the world, but in those early months the Bronx was at its epicenter.

By summer 2020, as the country exploded in protest against racism after the murder of George Floyd, it appeared Americans were finally able to see the interlocking injustices Covid had exposed. "Now the world knows what we already knew for so many years," Wanda Salaman said wearily. It was now the summer of 2021, and Salaman was sitting at a wooden picnic table in a community garden on East 181st Street, a few blocks west of the Bronx Zoo. This is the neighborhood in which she came of age and where she first got involved in community work nearly forty years ago. She began this work under the tutelage of Sr. Pat Dillon, RJM, and Astin Jacobo, a union organizer and former MLB scout who worked as a janitor at the local parish school. For years Jacobo—everybody called him Jacob—used the basketball teams he ran at St. Martin of Tours to collect intelligence on the landlord neglect that beset the borough in the seventies and eighties. He referred kids who reported they had no heat or water in their apartments to Dillon, the Bronx-native nun and community organizer. She would visit their parents and get them involved in the Crotona Community Association, part of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC). The groups took the landlords to court and in some cases helped tenants take over their buildings.

Those first months of the virus in 2020 sent a lot of people who survived the Bronx in the seventies and eighties reaching for the lessons of their past. The Bronx has seen bad times before. Its fixes came local. Salaman is now executive director of Mothers on the Move (MOM), an advocacy group that works for better public health and economic change. For years MOM battled the truck traffic that earned a line of South Bronx neighborhoods the nickname Asthma Alley. In the late 1990s MOM staged sit-down protests on the Sheridan Expressway, demanding that the highway be demolished. It advocated for tenants in overcrowded apartments where dilapidated conditions led to mold and roach infestations that further imperiled respiratory health. And it demanded proper staffing at the hospitals and health clinics that serve the South Bronx. MOM has also drawn attention to the precarious position of undocumented workers excluded from the formal economy, and decried the city's failure to provide viable neighborhood services even as mayors opened the public purse with tax breaks for the New York Yankees and FreshDirect. Founded in the 1990s as an advocacy group for education, MOM argues that all the crises in the Bronx are connected, each building on and compounding the others. Salaman and her colleagues have always had a clear understanding of the systemic failures that make life—and health—more precarious here. "We've *been* saying this is the problem but nobody's been listening. Now a lot of people have the same understanding."

It didn't take Covid for people in the Bronx to know that public health, racism, and economics are intertwined, that an economy predicated on exploitation makes people sick. Covid's spring 2020 assault on the Bronx came after years of anguish over rising rents and mounting precarity, as investors bought real estate like pork-belly futures and sent agents to scare away as many tenants as possible with illegal eviction notices and buyout offers. Meanwhile, the gig economy eroded the few protections workers once enjoyed. (Landmark tenant-protection legislation enacted in August 2019 promised a long-term shift in the dynamics of housing in NYC, but it was only beginning to be felt when Covid struck.)

"There's always these studies, these white papers on how to fix the Bronx," Salaman said as she leaned across the bright green picnic table. "They always pay someone who lives in West Bumblefuck to tell us what to do. Look, people here, we've got master's degrees in poverty. Because we've been living it. The people who are going to save our asses are the people in the community."

I'm not sure how time moves in other places, what dates echo loudest and which years loom largest. Maybe in Boston they are always thinking about busing or in Los Angeles about Rodney King. In New York, it's a scratch on the vinyl record: all modern history began with the fiscal crisis on the mid-1970s and the city's responses to it. We're forever frightened of feeling its cold breath on our neck. The city made a lot of decisions then that tumbled down the years like a bowling ball down a staircase. It gave central Manhattan real estate to a racist developer from Queens who turned the city's largesse and a variety of other flimflams into the presidency of the United States. It slashed arts and music education in schools and strangled the public-university system. It closed firehouses and cut housing inspectors. In waves of neglect and arson that were the culmination of decades of racist public policy—from 1930s redlining to 1960s urban renewal to the fiscal crisis ten years later—40 percent of buildings in some South Bronx neighborhoods burned between 1970 and 1980. More than a hundred thousand people fled. The people who stayed lived among blocks of rubbled wasteland, apartment buildings simply abandoned by owners and a city government openly advocating a policy called "planned shrinkage": withdraw services, hope people leave, turn the neighborhoods over to industrial use. In popular memory, this is Fear City, the bad old New York of stalled subway trains and repeat muggings, chain link across park-house doors and job cuts for city work-

ers. The gutting of NYC in the seventies gave rise to the crack, guns, and AIDS epidemics of the eighties. It's a specter that still haunts New York political life. In the summer of 2020, we kept catching a glimpse of it out of the corner of our eye as we paced nervously on the subway platform. From their homes in the Hudson Valley and Eastern Long Island, New York editors assigned stories about the collapse of the city. They tuned up their instruments to play the dirges. A variety of stimulus interventions drove the ghost of the seventies back into his subway tunnel. But we know he's still in there.

What's missing from the nightmare memories of the bad old days is the work of the unglamorous neighborhood groups that brought them to an end—tenant associations and community organizations, frequently conceived by churches, often led by women, in many cases women of color, always led by poor and working-class people and their recently college-educated children. It's their work that held communities together and made recovery possible. If the ghost of fiscal-crisis NYC stalked the city in the summer of 2020, so did the phantasms of stocky blue-collar block captains in *batas*—the colorful housedresses of Puerto Rican grandmothers—who called out the city fathers, wrested services from a government that wanted them gone, and stitched together a survival plan.

Seeing in the Dark

In those first months of Covid, groups that had been focused on housing, education, the arts, and economic development shifted to emergency provision of food, turning funding from the city council into bags of rice, yuca, macaroni, eggs. Grocery stores were picked over and the cash economy was teetering. Salaman made forays to Pennsylvania to buy toilet paper and antibacterial wipes she could share with neighbors. But while they pivoted to providing for the most basic needs, these local organizations were already making plans for the post-Covid future.

By fall, infection rates were galloping again, schools were closed, and Bronx neighborhoods were straining under the unprocessed grief of thousands of dead. The crisis was turning from acute to chronic. By May 2022, the state's emergency rental-assistance program would pay out $440 million to cover back rent in the Bronx. But thousands of tenants still have five-digit rental arrears, according to a report by the Association for Neighborhood & Housing Development. A moratorium on evictions enacted at the beginning of Covid ended in January 2022, flooding housing court with pent-up

Michael Partis, executive director of the Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative, in his office in the Bronx, June 13, 2022

RICKY FLORES

cases. The highest rates in the city were in Bronx neighborhoods, according to the Right to Counsel Coalition, which advocates for tenants facing eviction. The unemployment rate in the borough has also stayed stubbornly high, even amid much national talk of the difficulty of filling jobs. In August 2022 the national unemployment rate was 3.8 percent. In the Bronx it was more than double that: 9.5 percent. Stimulus checks and advance child tax credits that provided middle-class families with a welcome financial buffer often didn't find their way to people who hadn't filed tax returns and don't have bank accounts. Adjustments at the edge of the economy—even the massive government interventions that occurred during Covid—are insufficient, veteran Bronx activists argue. Trimmings from the edge of the pie can't rectify a fundamentally exploitative system.

It was in the fall of 2020 that people gathered to come up with a new plan for the borough. They wanted to think beyond the immediate crises they'd always raced to address. They started asking bigger questions: What is it we actually want? If we could imagine a better Bronx, what would it be? All through the dark months of that dark year they logged onto Zoom calls, put aside grant reports and food-distribution spreadsheets, and dared to dream.

Convening many of these meetings was Michael Partis, a thirty-six-year-old Fordham grad who grew up in the South Bronx. The child of Belizean parents from the Garifuna ethnic group, Partis pursued a PhD in anthropology at the City University of New York before leaving to work in an education nonprofit in the Bronx. Just before Covid hit, in early 2020, he became executive director of the Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative (BCDI), a co-op incubator that's trying to shift how people in the Bronx interact with the economy.

"This is a long-term economic development plan," he explained on a sunny morning in June, in the rambling former parsonage just south of Fordham Road that is the BCDI headquarters. "Typically, bureaucrats have been doing the planning for local communities and it hasn't worked out so well." Instead BCDI, in partnership with MOM, NWBCCC, The Point Community Development Corporation (The Point), and a handful of well-established groups in the Bronx, is creating a plan for the borough's economy drawn from native expertise. "We are hosting people's assemblies to make sure the process is community-driven, community-led, and that the plan represents what the people want the economy to look like long-term, not short-term," Partis said. The architects of the Bronxwide Plan are looking thirty years ahead. So often their work is stuck in crisis-response mode. Now they want to think long term, so that they take power over the economic forces that have battered the Bronx. But thinking big takes practice. Participants in assemblies and listening sessions are asked to think beyond the provision of direct services like after-school tutoring or food pantries, and instead to consider an entity in the neighborhood that's already working well—maybe a farmers' market, or a childcare co-op—and that could be expanded or transformed to create a shared economic stake in the community.

A youthful-looking man with an easy smile, Partis worked for months from home, his three young children occasionally rushing across the screen at Zoom meetings. "What we've gotten during Covid is a lot of trickle-down money. It has been helpful—but this is what happens when it's not structural. The money will run out and then what? We still haven't solved the structural problems in our neighborhoods."

If we don't want this crisis after crisis, the leaders in the Zoom meetings asked each other, what is it that we do want? For more than a year they formulated goals that covered housing, education, manufacturing, health, energy and the environment, transportation, and food—all focused on policies that would build communal wealth. There has never been a shortage of money in the Bronx; it's just that so much of the wealth generated here leaves. The borough has been making people rich for a long time. Apartment buildings full of poor tenants paying half their income in rent generate tremendous profit for landlords who are willing to skimp on maintenance and leverage properties as debt instruments. Commercial districts like Fordham Road and the Hub funnel billions of dollars to corporations with stores there. The Amazon warehouses that brought yet more truck traffic to the South Bronx during the pandemic added to Jeff Bezos's stratospheric wealth. Partis and his colleagues wanted to find a way to keep that money in the neighborhood, so that the residents of the Bronx would have a stake in the borough's economy. "We want to give people something to look forward to, to build to," Partis said.

On a breezy Saturday at the end of June about 150 people gathered in Hunts Point Riverside Park for the first in a series of open-air public assemblies to solicit specific ideas from people in nearby neighborhoods—and to introduce the Bronxwide Plan itself to a wider audience. The assembly was hosted by The Point, which has worked for thirty years to build community and improve conditions in Hunts Point. Hunts Point Riverside Park stretches from the truck-heavy Hunts Point Avenue to the bucolic Bronx River, where another local group, Rocking the Boat, runs a sailing camp for local kids and takes them seining—fishing with nets to explore the fauna of the river. There's a picnic atmosphere in the park today. Music plays while people spray-paint colorful posters extolling the Bronxwide Plan and staff from various participating organizations talk to visitors about community solar initiatives, ideas for free WiFi networks, and initiatives that would allow food vendors to make their businesses more sustainable.

Today's assembly capped off the annual fish parade—an ebullient neighborhood march from The Point's headquarters on Garrison Avenue here to the shores of the river. It started twenty years ago as a protest against city government's plan to relocate the giant wholesale Fulton Fish Market to a neighborhood already burdened by too much truck traffic. The protest was unsuccessful—the new fish market opened—but a tradition was born of marching to the river and introducing neighbors to the hidden beauty behind the warehouses. In the

parade's first years, people processed—in exuberant homemade fish costumes—to Barretto Point Park on the other side of the peninsula. "In the beginning it was about saying how do you get to the park safely," explained Danny Peralta, longtime director of arts and education for The Point and newly appointed director of En Foco, a forty-five-year-old South Bronx photo gallery devoted to advancing Nuyorican artists. "In the parade we'd honor people who don't get recognized by the newspapers, but who are the real people who keep a neighborhood together." In more recent years the parade's destination has become this pleasing parenthesis of a park, just blocks from the Bruckner Expressway. "The metaphor is the school of fish marching together," Peralta told me. "I think this is important—we have this waterfront community. We do march together. That's the beautiful thing in this neighborhood. That's how we move."

Hunts Point Riverside Park is one of a network of parks along the southern stretches of the river, all of them born from the unrelenting demands of neighborhood people. Men whose day of work is done now walk to the river with fishing rods leaned against their shoulders, toting plastic contractor buckets filled with bait fish. Once choked with debris and toxic with chemical waste, the river has been reclaimed after tenacious local advocacy for federal clean-up funds. Volunteers spent hundreds of Saturdays hauling garbage and planting trees. Now every summer weekend the Bronx River Alliance runs canoe trips down the river, where paddlers see egrets, herons, cormorants, and tiny herring returning to their spawning grounds.

Better Ghosts in Yolanda Garcia Park

Yolanda Garcia was among those fierce and loving Bronxites who stayed. After the fires, her Melrose neighborhood along Third Avenue near 150th Street was pockmarked with vacant lots and half-demolished buildings. When she learned in 1992 that city government was preparing to impose a top-down urban-renewal project on the neighborhood, displacing thousands of residents who had held on during the bad years, she rallied neighbors. The city would have to scrap any plan the neighborhood hadn't approved. Working with urban planner Petr Stand, the group created the Melrose Commons Plan, a roadmap out of disaster. It was a blueprint for the neighborhood they thought they deserved. Nos Quedamos ("We Stay") is the nonprofit housing developer and community organization Garcia and others eventually founded.

The Melrose Commons Plan called for zero displacement, a mix of owning and renting, a footprint that respected the streetscape and pedestrian flow of the neighborhood, environmental sustainability, and attractive, high-quality buildings. In 1994 the plan was approved by the city government and adopted by the department of city planning. It was bottom-up planning: design and use determined by the people who knew what their neighborhood needed and who wedged a chair up to the table where the city made decisions. The Melrose Commons Plan is now studied in city-planning classes and written about in books of urban theory. In 2019, just before Covid shut down the city and the world, Nos Quedamos completed its vision, dedicating the last of twelve community gardens within the thirty-three-block area where they manage apartments for four thousand families. The population of the neighborhood has rebounded in the thirty years since the plan was approved. In that time, Yolanda died and Petr's beard grew grey, then white. A Puerto Rican neighborhood became a Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, West African, Bangladeshi neighborhood. Employment shifted from garment work to health care, and the financial mechanisms for building apartments changed. Bankers came to understand the profit that could be made from low-income housing. Some of the ideas that were once considered utopian became commonplace. The Bronxwide Plan takes some inspiration from the Melrose Plan of a generation ago.

It was breezy in Yolanda Garcia Park at 160th Street and Melrose Avenue as late afternoon sun set the bricks glowing one Sunday in July 2021. A few dozen people stretched out on the green grass, which breathed oxygen into a neighborhood of heat and bus exhaust. Kids played on a jungle gym. Four hip Boricua actors strode to the center of the park and stepped to microphones in front of conga players who had been calling the beat all afternoon. From Bayamón to the Bronx, tropics to tenant meetings, it's a five-hundred-year rhythm reaching across time and oceans: talking drums in Ghana turned to Bomba in the Caribbean and salsa then hip-hop in *El Bronx*. The actors began a chant: *Dios mío, protege mi edificio*, channeling the incantation of their grandmothers, who grabbed rosaries when they smelled smoke during the burning in the seventies and eighties. The play, directed by Rosalba Rolón, is called *TORCHED!*. It premiered at the Pregones Theater a year later. It tells the story of the destruction of the Bronx, but it's also about today and tomorrow—how the Bronx will survive this time. It's a bit like a séance, calling up these ghosts in this very place: a lot that held a cluster of apartment buildings burned one year, razed to rubble several years later, then left as a reminder of neglect for many years more. Now it's a park hosting theater and music. The city officially designated it Yolanda Garcia Park in 2018.

On a sweltering Sunday afternoon in the narrow side yard beside the Pregones Theater on 150th Street, a band flown in from Puerto Rico plays for a rapt crowd. Jessica Clemente, the current executive director of Nos Quedamos, holds the shoulders of her two young sons. "I wanted them to see this," she said. "They need to know what community is, to experience the culture." Clemente has been with Nos Quedamos since college. She grew up in the Mill Brook public-housing development nearby and returned from college in upstate New

The Kingsbridge Armory

RICKY FLORES

York to work for Garcia, hired to help with an asthma study in the early 2000s. She stayed on. Nos Quedamos implemented the Melrose Commons Plan *poco a poco*: another garden, another building, another housing lottery to get people into apartments where families could thrive. The city ordered community gardens closed to the public during the worst months of Covid, but the gardeners kept up, coaxing food from the soil, setting out boxes of greens and tomatoes for neighbors. When restrictions eased, the gardens became places where locals could break the loneliness of long confinement.

Before Covid, Nos Quedamos applied for a $650,000 grant from Empire State Development—the state government's economic development arm—for a sustainability project that will install solar canopies in the gardens, capturing rainwater and recirculating irrigation. "These resiliency hubs would have enough power to charge 150 laptops. Then you could have refrigeration. We know a crisis is going to come. This isn't the last one," Clemente said. Nos Quedamos is a key member of the group working on the Bronxwide Plan. Clemente is optimistic, but also clear-eyed. "There are a lot of challenges in our neighborhood, but I want to lean on our strengths," she told me. "You have to lean on organization, the leverage of policy and advocacy. Because change comes when you change policy."

In the Shadow of the Armory

The Kingsbridge Armory was built between 1912 and 1917 to house the National Guard and keep control of radicals and restive immigrant workers—one of a dozen looming castles that mushroomed about the city between the Gilded Age and World War I. The armory's drill hall, just one portion of the building, is the size of two football fields. There is an eight-hundred-seat auditorium. And a moat. It is nine stories tall and occupies a five-acre superblock that is a quarter-mile long. It feels like a Duplo set in a Lego neighborhood. Owned by the city and mostly vacant since the 1990s, the Kingsbridge Armory has been the subject of intense wrangling between community organizations, local politicians, and the economic development teams of a series of New York City mayors. In the mid-nineties, parents in this severely overcrowded district wanted to see it turned into schools. Mayor Giuliani wanted to build a mall. In the early aughts, local groups wanted to turn it into a giant community center with basketball courts and mom-and-pop businesses. Mayor Bloomberg wanted to replicate Chelsea Market, courting high-end epicures. The Kingsbridge Armory Redevelopment Alliance—a partnership between the NWBCCC, the

retail-workers union, and a variety of local groups—demanded a say in what developer was selected and defeated a proposal by the politically connected Related Companies. Improbably, a group fronted by a former NHL player convinced the city and the neighborhood that the armory should house the world's largest ice-skating center. In 2013 the Kingsbridge Armory Redevelopment Alliance brokered a community-benefits agreement that promised a million dollars' worth of free ice time to local schools and community groups, guarantees for local hiring, and jobs with living wages. People started joking that in twenty years the NHL would be mostly Dominican. But for almost ten years nothing happened. The developer hadn't secured sufficient investment. The deal collapsed. In fall 2021, the city retook control of the building.

In the shadow of the armory there had long been a woman with a small cart selling empanadas to people exiting the 4 train at Kingsbridge Road. Another woman occupied her place during the morning rush hour, her granny cart stacked with coolers full of tamales, and a twist-off thermos full of arroz con leche. But as the economic dislocation of Covid wore on, the wide apron of sidewalk beside the armory sprouted more and more vendors. Now fold-out tables and blankets spread on the ground stretch the full length of the superblock. For sale: sneakers and old coats; scuffed high heels pulled from the back of the closet; medical gowns garnered from who-knows-where; pots and pans and household knickknacks; bins full of plastic Happy Meal toys; DVDs and VHS tapes; phone cases in every color, studded with rhinestones; chunky necklaces with pendants of the *Divino Niño*, his plump toddler arms outstretched.

Rasel sells clothes and is proud of the sneakers he has on offer today: "Mint condition," he says, turning them over to reveal virgin soles. "Look at that. Nikes, LAX edition. Online these are like $155. I'm selling them for $35." Rasel finished college more than a decade ago but lost his job during Covid. "I started coming out here about eighteen months ago," he says on a breezy day in May 2022. "A lot of people make their living here."

Ariel sits in the back of his van, hemmed in by eight folding tables pushed close together. Each of them is laden with workman's tools: ratchet sets and electric drills, hand sanders and screwdrivers. He buys them wholesale in New Jersey or Connecticut and resells them here. "Before Covid, I sold fruits and vegetables," he explains in Spanish as he surveys the table. "I came from Bayamón, Puerto Rico, four years ago." Hundreds of thousands have been driven from the island by the debt crisis, Puerto Rico's economy and governance dictated by bondholders much as New York City's was when austerity reined and the Bronx burned. Ariel sees a man he knows approaching. "Primo, I have a good little machine for you," he says, carefully reaching for a red canvas tool bag inside his van. He hands the customer a small electric drill. They haggle and banter a while before the customer moves on: no sale. Ariel wakes before 4 a.m. in Hunts Point, loads the van and begins setting out the tables by 5 a.m. He packs up at 8 p.m., after the last of the commuters trickle off the 4 train and glance at his wares. On a good day, he makes $150.

George has been selling at the Kingsbridge bazaar for a year and a half, after losing his job as a delivery driver during the pandemic. "We had to pay rent," he said. "Too much rent. We have to do something to survive." He explained that a friend told him about auctions at U-Haul, where goods left in storage lockers are sold off by the lot: tools, electronics, microwaves, and toaster ovens.

Street vendors line the sidewalk in front of the Kingsbridge Armory in the Bronx, June 13, 2022.

RICKY FLORES

Sandra Lobo, excutive director of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, at the 19th Annual Hunts Point Fish Parade and Summer Festival, June 18, 2022

RICKY FLORES

Darrell Edwards, a union electrician in his fifties, has been at the bazaar for more than a year, selling out the contents of his closets. "The Covid took me to where I had to do that if my family was going to eat," he said. "I was never used to this. I told my wife, we got a lot of stuff, let's see if we can sell it. On a good day, if you got good stuff, you might make a hundred dollars. Two dollars here, five dollars there. It's not like it's Saks Fifth Avenue," he chuckles. "The armory wants to push people away, tells us not to hang stuff on the fence. But people are just trying to survive."

The people designing the Bronxwide Plan want the armory, long a symbol of domination and disregard, to be part of a new Bronx economy, where people can do more than survive. They aren't asking for a seat at the table for this round of planning on the behemoth. They want to *own* the table, and turn the seats into co-ops, something that builds wealth with the people of the borough. This spring, the NWBCCC relaunched the armory campaign. Sandra Lobo, the NWBCCC's executive director, was a college student at Fordham when the armory fight began in the 1990s. Now she's a respected Bronx leader. In April, the NWBCCC convened strategy sessions. They pulled in elected officials who are sometimes political allies. They designed another flyer, came up with a new slogan. They know much more this time.

The Bronx has been through hell before. What built it back was a thousand tenant meetings and smart lobbying that demanded and finally won reinvestment. Those community activists pioneered new ways to build and manage multifamily housing. They picketed at commissioners' Westchester County homes until there was money for summer programs in the parks and housing inspections of shoddy buildings. When the Department of Sanitation said it couldn't clean the lot on 180th Street where it dumped the refuse of demolished buildings because it was worried the bulldozers would be stolen, Sr. Pat set out a lawn chair and slept outside to guard the city's bulldozer. That lot is now a city park with a playground, a meditation garden, and a ball field. A tenacious movement of hard-nosed visionaries showed what was possible. Combined with the entrepreneurial and cultural energy of the 1990s immigration surge, the borough breathed again. It never got easy here, but it got better.

The Bronxwide Plan sometimes seems too utopian—like it might float away on the airiness of activist rhetoric or sink under the weight of grad-school theorizing. But then the comptroller announces that the city will explore ways to transfer tax-delinquent properties to housing providers, and the state assembly holds hearings on a public bank; the city council allocates funds to groups developing land trusts, and the state legislature mandates a raise for home health aides. A few years ago, the U.S. Department of Transportation dismantled much of the highway MOM had been protesting since the 1990s, and the NYC Department of Health now states on its statistics pages that racial and ethnic disparities in Covid death rates are the result of structural racism. Such things didn't used to happen. What was once pie in the sky becomes commonplace.

Who will save the Bronx? The same people who always have.

EILEEN MARKEY *is an assistant professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York. She arrived in the Bronx in 1994 and is at work on a book about the movement that rebuilt the borough.*

The Storm Cloud of the Twenty-First Century

Eugene McCarraher

John Ruskin, Pope Francis, and global warming

The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*

When Pope Francis observed that the natural world had been infected with human wickedness, he echoed one of the more macabre and prescient prophecies of ecological ruin: *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884), John Ruskin's account of the impact of industrial capitalism on the weather of England. In Ruskin's eyes, the ailing earth had been contaminated by the putrescence of our wounded hearts. Polluting the skies with the effluvium of avarice, "iniquity" leavened the clouds; "bitterness and malice" befouled the winds; "poisonous smoke" composed of "dead men's souls" rose up from the ominous mills. "Blanched Sun,—blighted grass,—blinded man." This was "blasphemy," in Ruskin's view: a desecration of "the visible Heaven" and a sacrilege upon "all the good works and purposes of Nature." "Of states in such moral gloom every seer of old predicted the physical gloom," he warned. If the moral and material pestilence of industrialized avarice metastasized, our terrestrial paradise would become a ghastly inferno. The only antidotes to this metaphysical contagion were "Hope…Reverence…[and] Love"—a constellation of virtues that, by healing our desolate souls, would also mend or mitigate the desolation already inflicted on the planet.

A wildfire in Battleship Mountain, British Columbia, September 10, 2022

CNS PHOTO/BC WILDFIRE SERVICE VIA REUTERS

The phantasmagorical quality of Ruskin's vision has caused even many of his admirers, then and now, to attribute it to early-stage dementia. (One contemporary scholar has opined that *Storm-Cloud* is "more nearly eschatology than meteorology" and that it represents its author's "climactic shadow-struggle projected as apocalyptic myth." Thus the "gloom" is none other than Ruskin's own encroaching madness inscribed into the firmament.) Yet far from indicating delirium, *Storm-Cloud* offers a lucid and penetrating account of our ongoing assault on the natural world, heralding a planet existentially imperiled by the plague of capitalist modernity. Indeed, with his Romantic sensibility that alerted him to the eerie signs of the times, Ruskin anticipated Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*. Certainly, the reactions to Francis's letter mirror the derision directed at Ruskin. Like *Storm-Cloud*, *Laudato si'* was casually dismissed as the cri de coeur of a downer, "the work of a profoundly pessimistic man," as Matthew Schmitz lamented in *First Things*. Yet neither Francis's vision nor Ruskin's issue in melancholy. Precisely because they both exhibit a sacramental imagination that captures the direct and intimate connection of spiritual and ecological disorder, they rekindle and sustain a faith in Ruskin's hallowed trinity of virtues—the excellences of soul needed to confront the storm cloud of the twenty-first century.

Despite the obvious religious differences between the Victorian prophet and the pope—Ruskin was a heterodox Christian who had experienced an "unconversion" from Evangelicalism—a sacramental consciousness lies at the heart of their ecological imaginations. As one of the premiere Romantic intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Ruskin epitomized the Romantic inheritance of the medieval sacramental worldview, its modern restatement, in Wordsworth's lines, of

> ...a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

Throughout his work—from the art criticism of his early career to his later climatological oracles—Ruskin discerned the trademarks of divinity "deeply interfused" in nature. He argued in *Modern Painters* (1843–60) that artists portrayed the "faultless, ceaseless, inconceivable, inexhaustible loveliness, which God has stamped upon all things." The beauty of flowers, rocks, or human beings displayed, he wrote, "the Divine attributes." When we gaze upon "the material nearness of these heavens," he marveled, we "acknowledge His own immediate presence." In "The Work of Iron" (1858), Ruskin importuned readers to consider that a pebble possessed "a kind of soul," and that it would say to us, if we were inclined to listen, that "'I am not earth—I am earth and air in one; part of that blue heaven which you love, and long for, is already in me.'" When Ruskin reported on his ominous storm cloud, he was deciphering signs of sacrilege as well as recording ecological devastation.

Francis echoes Ruskin's Romantic apprehension of God's countenance in the material realm. Invoking the cultures of Indigenous peoples whose habitats are being stolen and contaminated, the pope lauds their belief that "land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God…a sacred space with which they need to interact." All of nature is "imbued with the radiant presence" of God; "to contemplate creation," he asserts elsewhere, "is to hear a message"; divinity conveys its power and love, he reminds us, even in "the last speck of dust of our planet." What Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the dearest freshness deep down things" envelops the entire universe, beckoning us into what Francis calls "universal communion" with all created things. Calling on us to relinquish the authoritarian desire for technological hegemony, he issues an invitation into an "openness to awe and wonder" that will reestablish "fraternity and beauty in our relationship with nature." Francis's ecological vision rests not on a moral and political claim about the primacy of the common good, but on an ontological claim about the nature of the universe: that its architecture is thoroughly leavened by what Dante called "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."

Although they share a sacramental cosmology, Francis and Ruskin travel in somewhat different critical and political directions. Perhaps the most controversial section of *Laudato si'* is Francis's account and condemnation of "the technocratic paradigm" in the encyclical's third chapter, "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis"—a thinly veiled retort to Lynn White Jr.'s 1966 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in which the historian argued that mounting environmental damage could be traced to the Judeo-Christian conviction that God had bestowed "dominion" over the planet to human beings. Rejecting White's equation of that "dominion" with what he calls a "Promethean vision of mastery over the world," Francis locates the roots of our ecological predicament in "an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm" for developing and using technology. This "technocratic paradigm," as he later dubs it, posits "a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object," which is conceived, he remarks, "as something formless, completely open to manipulation"—bereft, that is, of any sacramental quality. This imperious subject employs the scientific and experimental method, which is, in Francis's view, "already a technique of possession, mastery, and transformation." Anticipating the obvious objection that human beings have always sought to exert some degree of control over the rest of nature, Francis differentiates this modern paradigm of mastery from previous forms of dominion. Before the ascendency of the technocratic paradigm, he contends, human efforts to shape and master nature were "in tune with and respected the possibilities offered by the things themselves"—things were not, that is, seen as "formless, completely open to manipulation"—and mastery was thus "a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand." The relationship between the instruments of dominion and nature is conceived here as a collaborative, even loving process in which human beings practice receptivity as well as mastery and acknowledge the real material limitations on their ability to control and produce.

Under the "technocratic paradigm," however, this respectful and reverent relationship gives way to relentless exploitation—a "confrontational" relationship, in Francis's words, a combative and often violent struggle in which human beings seek both to establish unrestricted supremacy over nature and to "extract everything possible" from it, believing that through technological expertise they can sustain an economy of "infinite or unlimited growth." Worse, the technocratic paradigm has become not just a model for human dominion over the rest of nature but also, and perhaps even more insidiously, "an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society." Human beings turn the technocratic paradigm on themselves so as to extract everything they can in terms of efficiency and productivity. In this way, the pope warns, "technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic." For Francis, the technocratic paradigm is another term for what Max Weber dubbed "the disenchantment of the world": the evacuation of spiritual forces from the world so as to unleash technological control for the purpose of human prosperity—the de-sacramentalization of the world, a denial of Ruskin's "Divine attributes." The disenchanted logic of the technocratic paradigm sanctions a host of inhumane developments, two of which Francis discusses: automation, in which labor—which should be a way for human beings to cultivate and express their talents—is supplanted by machines; and the emergence of biotechnologies that dislocate farmers, diminish biodiversity, destroy ecosystems, and concentrate control over agricultural production in the hands of global corporations.

From this analysis Francis draws two important conclusions. First, he observes, "technological products are not neutral," an insight that runs contrary to the common wisdom that techniques, machines, and devices constitute an amoral, apolitical, and non-ideological edifice of instrumentality that can be used for any purpose, good or evil. Francis argues that because technology is designed by human beings, it inevitably embodies human purposes. Second, the non-neutrality of technical means implies that "decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build," a rebuke that reminds us that words such as "practical" or "efficient" are always empty and misleading unless they point to an objective in terms of which something is "practical" or "efficient." Since the triumph of the technocratic paradigm is responsible for looming ecological catastrophe, it must be repudiated, Francis maintains, in favor of a new—or old but renovated—paradigm through which humanity can "recover the values and the great goods swept away by our unrestricted delusions of grandeur." He sketches an "integral" or "social ecology" in which cultural,

economic, and ecological issues are interrelated, represented by "cooperatives of small producers [who] adopt less polluting means of production, and opt for a non-consumerist model of life, recreation, and community."

Francis's excoriation of the technocratic paradigm and his adumbration of a sacramental ecology make *Laudato si'* one of the most perspicacious moral and spiritual documents of our time—forthright in its condemnation of the desire for unbridled power, uncompromisingly bleak in its portrayal of the depredation that has immiserated so much of the world, and breathtakingly hopeful in its central conviction that, as Hopkins put it, "nature is never spent," precisely because of the "dearest freshness deep down things." It articulates clearly the inexorable consequences of the vision of an earlier Francis—Sir Francis Bacon, that is, who advanced the Promethean claims of the new science and technology at the advent of modernity. As the savants and technicians on the island of Bensalem declare in Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1626)—an early prototype of the modern alliance between scientific endeavor and industrial enterprise—"the end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." The endless expansion of "human empire" required a thoroughly utilitarian conception of the natural world; the objective of the new scientific method, Bacon asserted in his *Novum Organum* (1620), was to "bind her to your service and make her your slave." Rooted in spiritual blight, this project of subjugating the natural world has culminated, Francis shows, not in universal affluence but rather in global derangement.

Bacon was writing at the birth of capitalism, and it's the capitalist character of scientific and technological modernity that Francis tends to ignore or obscure, and which Ruskin helps us better remember and confront. To be fair, Francis does sometimes signal an acute awareness of the capitalist roots of our ecological crisis. He observes that our ecological woes stem directly from "our current models of production and consumption," and he rues that "the economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit." He clearly names the champions of the technocratic paradigm: "economists, financiers, and experts in technology"—in other words, the business clerisy, the monetary wizards, and the Silicon Valley tech bros who constitute the intelligentsia of neoliberal capitalism. There are numerous other instances in which Francis appears to link ecological catastrophe to the everyday mechanisms of capital accumulation. And yet, Francis never once calls the system by its name, relying instead on any number of euphemisms and circumlocutions.

Alas, Francis's reluctance to directly indict capitalism both banalizes his portrayal of the "technocratic paradigm" and limits his political imagination. His lack of historical specificity leads him—as it led earlier critics such as Friedrich Georg Jünger, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Ellul—to write of an undifferentiated "technology" that appears to act as a historical agent in its own right, unfettered from the purposes and control of the human beings who create it. Recall how Francis asserts that "technology tends to absorb everything into *its* ironclad logic"—not the pecuniary logic of capital, shared by the professional and managerial classes who act as its faithful stewards. Here, Francis seems to forget his own admonition that "technology" is not neutral. Conservative critics would have lost their minds if the pope had cited the first volume of *Capital*, but there Marx demonstrates that mechanization in the capitalist factory—conducted today under the rubric of "automation"—was and always will be about gaining greater control over workers and the work process and about augmenting the surplus value that capital can extract from labor. Indeed, there's a long line of Marxist and non-Marxist historians—from Lewis Mumford to Harry Braverman to David F. Noble—who have documented the capitalist imperatives that have shaped technologies, from their selection to their design.

At the same time, Francis's unwillingness to, as they used to say, "name the system," threatens to turn the encyclical into yet another bland exercise in moralism. Take, for instance, his many imprecations against "consumerism." Because they tend to categorize consumption as a strictly moral issue, critics of "consumerism" too often wind up engaging in finger-wagging rather than social criticism, and this facile moralism is one of the more condescending forms of bourgeois virtue-signaling in a field already far too crowded. To be sure, consumption is a moral affair, but however deftly and beguilingly the culture industries prey on some of the worst features of human nature, "consumerism" is a structural imperative of the modern capitalist economy; mass production requires mass consumption and its apparatus of advertising, marketing, and consumer debt. Preaching jeremiads (religious or secular) has been of little discernible avail against the cultural strategies of accumulation. In short, talking about consumerism is often just a way of *not* talking about capitalism.

Francis's hesitancy about naming capitalism introduces an incoherence into the political implications of "integral" or "social ecology." "Business is a noble vocation," Francis writes somewhat defensively, "directed to producing wealth and improving our world"—"especially," he adds, when it "sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good." Although we don't hear much anymore of the Ayn-Randian bunkum about "job creators," it's essential to remember that the purpose of business under capitalism is to accumulate capital, not to create jobs or to serve the common good. Why are businesses for which job creation is supposed to be so essential a service automating production and services at an accelerating pace? Because automation cuts down or eliminates labor costs and increases profits. Work under capitalism is not arranged so as to allow workers to flourish; it's arranged (and increasingly surveilled) to exploit and discipline them. Those producer cooperatives in which Francis invests his hopes would have to conduct their work and employ their technology within a very different institutional ecology.

Ruskin contended that capitalism, far from fostering a "disenchantment" or de-sacramentalization of the world, had erected its own totemic structure of deity, sacrament, and devotions.

Ruskin, by contrast, insisted that *capitalism* lay at the root of our ecological crisis—that capitalism, not technology per se, was generating the ecological conditions for the storm clouds of the coming centuries. Well before *Storm-Cloud*, in *Unto This Last* (1862)—his controversial foray into "political economy," which was even more harshly rebuked than *Storm-Cloud*—Ruskin had forthrightly asserted that capitalism and Christianity are antithetical and incompatible. "I know no previous instance in history," he observed, "of a nation's establishing a systematic disobedience to the first principles of its professed religion." "The writings which we (verbally) esteem as divine," he continued, "not only denounce the love of money as the source of all evil, and as an idolatry abhorred of the Deity, but declare mammon service to be the accurate and irreconcilable opposite of God's service." A decade later, in *Munera Pulveris* (1872), Ruskin contended that capitalism, far from fostering a "disenchantment" or de-sacramentalization of the world, had erected its own totemic structure of deity, sacrament, and devotions. "We have, indeed, a nominal religion, to which we pay tithes of property and sevenths of time. But we have also a practical and earnest religion, to which we devote nine-tenths of our property, and six-sevenths of our time." "Getting-on" was the name of this religion's divinity, or, rather, Mammon, "the great evil Spirit of false and fond desire, or 'Covetousness, which is Idolatry.'"

Ruskin's acute perception of the grotesque sacramentality of capitalism was inseparable from his courageous advocacy of what is sometimes called "small-c communism." Although he referred to himself as "a violent Tory of the old school," Ruskin inspired William Morris, R. H. Tawney, G.D.H. Cole, and many others in the rank-and-file of British socialism before World War I. In the series of open letters to industrial workers in the 1870s that became *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin dubbed himself "a Communist of the old school…reddest of the red."

What was this "old-school" and "reddest of the red" communism? Ruskin never provided any coherent, systematic answer to this question, but in *Fors Clavigera* he hinted that his ideal community of workers was a body of artisans and farmers, devoted to the production of useful, beautiful objects and to the conviction that "public, or common, wealth shall be more and statelier in all its substance than private or singular wealth"; indeed, "the common treasure of the whole nation should be of superb and precious things." Moreover, "the fortunes of private persons should be small" and their dwellings should be equally modest; but public buildings—schools, libraries, and fountains, for instance—should be "magnificent" and "noble."

The principle of communist property in this producer's republic of virtue would be that, in Ruskin's words, "our property belongs to everybody, and everybody's property to us." This reflects what anthropologists have called "usufruct": a regime of property rights (common among tribal and archaic communities) as inhering in use and need rather than in mere legal ownership. Usufruct elides the distinction between "private" and "common"; even if I "own" an object, it becomes someone else's—or the whole community's—if it's needed, and the community has a claim on whatever I produce on "my" land, shop, office, or factory. It's a far more fluid, democratic, and egalitarian conception of property rights than that enforced in capitalist societies, in which ownership entails almost absolute rights of use and exclusion. (Although we do see traces of usufruct in the laws of eminent domain, whereby private property can be seized on behalf of the common good.) Usufruct also makes sense of the early Christians as depicted in the book of Acts—one of the most disconcerting passages in the New Testament, and one that has given rise to many risible feats of exegetical and homiletical duplicity. "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had," Luke tells us; the first Christians in Jerusalem (and, it seems, throughout the Roman Empire) erased the line between private and common. (David Bentley Hart is only reporting the good news when he suggests that the political economy of Christianity is anarcho-communism.) The communist imperative of the Gospel was so clear that even after the Constantinian compromise with the principalities of property and politics, Christians continued to affirm the revolutionary implications of the *evangelion*. Following, for example, St. Basil—"the bread that you keep belongs to the hungry, the cloak in your closet to the naked"—and St. Thomas Aquinas—the "universal destination of goods"—Francis writes in *Laudato si'* of a "social mortgage on private property." It's the closest he comes to a straightforward declaration of the communist Gospel.

Because the capitalist mortgage on private property has to be paid in profits and dividends, one of its uses, as Ruskin noted in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), is the mechanization of production for the purposes of lowering costs and controlling workers—"proletarianization," in Marxist terms, or workers' displacement from artisanal modes of labor and their relocation in urban factories. For Marx, this was a step forward in history, as the industrial regime of technology outstripped the precision and productivity of its artisanal predecessor. To Ruskin, this "degradation of the operative into a machine" marked a regression and a desecration. "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him," Ruskin mused. "You

cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions." Workers who labored like machines inevitably lost any joy in the act of creation. "It is not that men are ill fed," Ruskin wrote, "but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread."

Ruskin's "old-school" communism is not that of the Marxist tradition. For Marxists, communism is the conclusion of a dialectical historical process in which capitalism creates the social and technological conditions for abundance. Thus, in the Marxist scenario, what Ruskin described as the consequences of "mammon-service"—the concentration of industry, the complete mechanization and dehumanization of technology, the dispossession of workers from control over the means of production—are necessary, albeit painful, stages in the path to communism. The "technocratic paradigm" represents, in this view, the arduous but inescapable de-sacramentalization of matter and its subordination to the Promethean will of a humanity increasingly liberated from all constraints on productive power. Despite recent attempts to greenwash Marx, Marxists have inherited from their capitalist antagonists a commitment to economic growth as the foundation of freedom—a warrant to exploit the earth which, as Theodor W. Adorno once remarked, underwrote Marx's apparent determination to turn the planet into a giant factory. As an "old-school" communist outraged by the "blasphemy" spewed into the heavens, Ruskin stood against this mythology of "progress," and the ecological ruin it entailed.

Because it repudiates the capitalist insistence on expanded productivity, Ruskin's communism also valorizes a qualitative evaluation of goods. Conventional capitalist economics assesses the health of any economy in the sheerly quantitative terms of a growing "gross domestic product" (GDP): the annual sum of goods and services, irrespective of how evil, dangerous, or stupid those goods and services are. Cigarettes, processed meats, and Cocoa Krispies are numbered along with cabernet, spinach, and bananas. People are similarly tabulated: GDP does not distinguish between the healthy enjoyment and the abuse of cabernet, for instance, nor can it account for the difference between the working conditions of tenured academia and those of Walmart or Amazon workers. It does not measure the chasm between the unbridled and callous rapacity of a Jeff Bezos and the philanthropy of Patagonia's Yvon Chouinard. Such distinctions could be conveyed only through the sort of moral economy enunciated in *Unto This Last*, where Ruskin distinguishes between "wealth"—"the possession of the valuable by the valiant"—and "illth"—"that which causes destruction and devastation in all directions." Wealth, in this view, depends on both the nature of the object and the condition or character of the person who uses or produces it: *both* must be good for something to be considered genuine wealth. As Ruskin declared in his most renowned passage:

> There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.

By this subtle, expansive, and exacting standard, much that passes for wealth in our diseased economy is really illth.

Though usually applied to the realm of use or consumption, the criteria that differentiate wealth and illth could also be adapted—with potentially revolutionary consequences—to the realm of property as well. If wealth involves the valiance of those who *use* objects or services, why should it not involve that of those who *make* goods or *provide* services as well? Property is surely a "possession of the valuable"—the means of production or care. What would constitute valiance in production or care? Not just useful and beautiful things or thoughtful, sensitive care, but also attention to the virtues of craft (in the provision of nursing or education, as well as in the making of objects), commitment to comfortable living standards, and regard to the ecological impact of technology. Valiance, then, entails the reclamation of technical prowess, organizational skill, and political acumen by workers themselves. Enterprises would have to be governed by the producers themselves, not by a special class of technocratic managers. To be sure, Ruskin himself was a Tory paternalist. The owner of a business, he insisted in *Unto This Last*, is the "governor of the men employed by him." We need new models of valiant communism, imbued with the sacramental consciousness displayed in the charity of the early Christians.

Political economy is inseparable from ecology, and, as Pope Francis himself acknowledges, the property and production relations of society are intimately intertwined with its relationships to the rest of nature. Only some kind of radically democratic economics, leavened by a sacramental sensibility, offers a compelling alternative to capitalism's instrumentalist desecration of people, other animals, and the rest of creation. Tethered now to an enfeebled neoliberal consensus, that paradigm is already dying; the creeping senescence of capitalism will be, I think, one of the major storylines of our era. The ecological consequence of that doomed paradigm, global warming, is already upon us; some degree of devastation, perhaps considerable, is already our unavoidable fate. The storm cloud of the twenty-first century is drought and desertification, wildfires and rising sea levels. But as Hopkins would remind us, the dearest freshness deep down things is still available, even now. If we can learn to practice the trinity of Hope, Reverence, and Love, we might still be able to rescue what's left of the real wealth that is life.

EUGENE MCCARRAHER *is professor of humanities and history at Villanova University. This essay draws upon two lectures: an address to the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University–Chicago on October 15, 2020, and the 2022 Ruskin Lecture, sponsored by the Ruskin Art Club and delivered at the University of Southern California on September 8, 2022.*

The Rock and the Peregrine

James Chappel

How the Church became modern

Catholics are obsessed with their history. In researching my own book on Catholic history, I met scores of Catholic laypeople and clergy across Europe and America. Never have I met people so fascinated by, and knowledgeable about, the history of their own institution. They are in some ways ill served by historians. For decades, there has not been a serviceable single-volume history of the modern Church: one that understood that the Church was now global, and that a history of the papacy is no stand-in for a history of the Church. This is not for lack of data. Historians of Catholicism, whether Catholic or not, have been doing truly exceptional work in the past few decades. And yet those findings are not always making their way to the many millions who hunger for them. Historians, it turns out, are not always the best storytellers.

This is the gap that John T. McGreevy, himself an eminent historian, has attempted to fill with his new book. *Catholicism* tries to cover the whole sweep of modern Catholic history in a brisk four hundred pages. It does not cover every theme that could conceivably interest the Catholic reader. The book is at its core a work of political and social history. There is little here about, say, Catholic music, or liturgy, or Biblical criticism; nor is there much about the Catholic engagement with technology (either older ones like newspapers, or newer ones like the internet). All the same, the breadth of material that McGreevy has managed to gather is stunning, and this is a book that is more interested in the Church on the ground than in the machinations of leaders and councils. "All Catholics dwell in local parishes and communities," McGreevy notes, "not an abstraction called global Catholicism." Those seeking to understand their local experience, and the way it's been shaped by empire and war and feminism and immigration, should begin their reading here.

Pope John XXIII sends a radio message to Spain, October 21, 1961.

The book is, at its core, less a work of original scholarship than a synthesis of the best works in the field. This is not a criticism. McGreevy has done heroic work reading hundreds of detailed academic studies. And something interesting happens when you take all that work and ask how it helps us understand the Church of the present—a Church overshadowed, above all, by the sex-abuse crisis, which has not attracted much attention from historians. McGreevy is able to narrate that crisis as an organic evolution of the Church's modern history rather than as the dastardly deeds of a few individuals and their accomplices. But to understand how he does that, we have to walk, with McGreevy, back to the beginning.

The book begins with the French Revolution: the event that, more than any other, shattered the dream of a unified Catholic society, in a uniformly Catholic Europe. McGreevy signals at the outset that he is not going to tell the standard narrative of a unified Church under assault from bloodthirsty atheists. Because in addition to showing us the Catholics who opposed the Revolution, or were killed by it, he introduces us to the Abbé Henri Grégoire: a bishop who was also an enthusiastic revolutionary. Grégoire was a supporter of the Haitian Revolution, as were many clergy, and he corresponded enthusiastically with Toussaint Louverture, who, McGreevy reminds us, was also a Catholic. And no less than the more familiar conservatives who were horrified by the Revolution, Grégoire emerged from a coherent strain of thinking—one that McGreevy calls "Reform Catholicism" and which was committed, in some way, to reconciling the faith with the democratic and scientific spirit of the age.

The Revolution, and all it augured, was nonetheless an enormous threat to the Church. And in the bulk of his book, spanning from 1800 to about 1950, McGreevy explains how the Church responded—and what a smashing success it was. The basic idea can be summarized in two phrases: "ultramontanism" and "the milieu."

"Ultramontanism" refers, technically, to the belief in the supremacy and importance of the pope. More broadly, it can refer to the idea that the Church should be hierarchically organized into a tight, quasi-military institution, with celibate parish priests at the bottom and the pope himself at the top. The powers of the papacy expanded a great deal during these years, and "papal infallibility" became dogma only in 1870. The Church could not have responded nearly as well as it did if it had effectively shattered into dozens of quasi-independent national churches. Ultramontanism was designed to centralize and solidify the Church, giving it a powerful base from which to negotiate its position with a quickly changing "world."

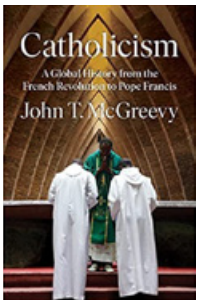
But that was only half of the strategy, as any Catholic knows. The other half was the "milieu": the idea that Catholics ought to build a network of institutions that could nourish Catholic living from cradle to grave, even in a world where politics was spinning free of the Church. Women religious played an important role here—people like Mary Catherine McAuley, the Irishwoman who founded the Order of Mercy. Like other innovations of this sort, the order was involved with founding schools and hospitals, creating a Catholic infrastructure that survives in some ways to the present. And while the notion of

a "milieu" seems to denote spatial isolation, McGreevy shows time and again how Catholics were on the move in the nineteenth century. Polish, Italian, and Irish Catholics, especially, spread around the world, bringing new kinds of Catholic sociability with them (to the United States, of course, but he shows that they had an impact in Latin America, too).

These innovations of the nineteenth century served the Church well in the chaotic decades around 1900. One of the gravest challenges of the era was nationalism: the idea that individuals should devote themselves body and soul to the nation. This presented obvious challenges for an international Church with its own claims on the soul. The conflict had concrete effects. States in these years were centralizing control over marriage, education, and other social spheres that many Catholic leaders viewed as their own turf.

The clash between Catholicism and nationalism was one of the leitmotifs of global history between 1870 and 1950. The great symbol for this was the Kulturkampf of nineteenth-century Germany, when Chancellor Otto von Bismarck embarked on a damaging campaign against a Church he regarded as something of an internal enemy. That kind of overt Church-state conflict, though, was more the exception than the norm. More often, the Church sought some kind of accommodation with nationalism, which it saw as less dangerous, at least, than communism. This led to more and more participation in democratic politics—and it led, more controversially, to various forms of accommodation with fascism. McGreevy is not especially interested in retreading that ground, and the sections on fascism and war are some of the sketchiest in the book. He does not take into account the newly opened archives from the World War II era. (For that, readers can turn to David Kertzer's *The Pope at War*.)

McGreevy is more interested in stories that are less frequently told, but arguably more important to the long development of the Church: the Catholic engagement with empire, which provides the crucial



CATHOLICISM
A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis

JOHN T. MCGREEVY
W. W. Norton & Company
$35 | 528 pp.

prehistory to the epochal shift to the Global South that has remade the Church in recent decades. While there had long been Catholic missionaries, the whole enterprise was expanded in the late nineteenth century. The Church was just one of many European institutions, from states to armies to corporations, that ramped up global operations in this period, sometimes known as the first wave of globalization. In China, for instance, the number of missionaries more than quadrupled from 1860 to 1900.

When these missionaries arrived in foreign lands, they brought the ultramontane, milieu-style sensibility with them. They were spreading devotion not just to Jesus, but also to the pope; they were spreading not just a religion, but a way of life. This was especially true in the empire, where control from the metropole was often tenuous. In the Congo, for instance, the Belgian missionary and bishop Victor Roelens was exercising enormous control over schools and municipal governments. And while Catholic missionaries at first claimed independence from imperial projects, by 1900 that was impossible to do. While there were, of course, differences across time and space, the general impression is that Catholics were surprisingly congenial to empire. In France, for instance, the Church at home was under assault at the same moment that it was working hand-in-glove with the state in the empire.

When it came to both nationalism and imperialism, then, the general story is that Catholics were enormously creative in finding ways to coexist with secular institutions and carve out influential niches for themselves. They could not do so, however, without getting their hands dirty and linking the Church to one of the central commitments of both nationalists and imperialists: racism. In Europe itself, Catholics across the continent were highly susceptible to anti-Semitism, while in the American South, many Catholics worshipped in segregated churches. In the empire, meanwhile, it was impossible to associate with imperial projects while remaining distant from the racial hierarchies that animated them. This reached its horrific apogee with the boarding schools that Catholics ran for some Indigenous populations. It is hard to square these institutions, which banned traditional dress and separated children from their parents, with the language of Christ. But it is also hard to see how the Church could have been so at home in the empire, and so committed to an educational mission, without ending up running schools like these.

I am providing, here, the barest summary of McGreevy's intensely detailed, and intensely human, account. His narrative is sutured together through human stories of individual Catholics, men and women, Black and brown and white, crossing borders and trying to make their faith work in the modern world. Each chapter is organized around a few individual stories, giving a human dimension to the grand and global themes of the chapter. The account of high imperialism is organized around the life of Mbange Akwa, a German-educated African who became important to the Church in Cameroon. And for his journey through Catholic

nationalism, McGreevy uses Ma Xiangbo, a Chinese priest and supporter of the 1911 Revolution, as his guide. This is decidedly not a history of "old white men," just as the Church is not made up, primarily, of old white men.

Thus far in the book, McGreevy's work has been primarily to synthesize and narrate. He does not step beyond the scholarly consensus, and on the most burning questions, he offers something like a middle ground. This changes a bit in the last third of the book, when McGreevy trains his attention on Vatican II and the Church in the late twentieth century.

Because McGreevy has labored so much to decenter the Vatican from his account of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) is able to appear in his book as one facet of a sweeping reorientation of the Church after World War II. In Europe and America, new consumer cultures and the Cold War led to a more reformist kind of Catholicism, less interested in struggle with Protestants. In the Global South, waves of decolonization shifted the calculus of power and led Catholics toward a new awareness of their complicity with racism. In the Philippines and Vietnam, among many other places, Catholicism became more "indigenous" than before, and more in league with anti-colonial forms of nationalism.

By the time Vatican II started, therefore, the Church had already been changed, and the easy relationship between the Church, the milieu, and the "West" had already begun to break down. This is not to say that Vatican II didn't matter: it did, enormously. McGreevy tells the dramatic and surprising history of the council, but it's hard to escape the impression that many of the resolutions more or less affirmed what had been going on in the Church for some time. In any case, that affirmation mattered. For with it, in McGreevy's words, "the phase of Catholic history beginning with the ultramontane revival of the late nineteenth century had concluded." No longer would Mass be celebrated in Latin; no longer would the Church position itself as a bastion of Western, imperial values; no longer would Catholics be told to hunker down into a milieu and erect barriers against the modern world.

Most immediately, this allowed the Church to participate more fully in the ongoing struggle between capitalism and communism. This took multiple forms. In Latin America, most prominently, many Church leaders and intellectuals spearheaded new forms of Catholic socialism, some of which became known as liberation theology. On the global stage, meanwhile, Pope John Paul II became the face of anti-communism, and he played a central role in the end of the Cold War. And while he was personally lukewarm toward free-market capitalism, his antipathy to socialism led many Catholic thinkers, in the United States and elsewhere, to try to reconcile the faith with the new economic order in ways that would not have been possible a few decades earlier.

In McGreevy's telling, though, the council was nonetheless answering the questions posed by the Church's past, while ignoring the ones that would define its future. Historians are addicted to studying the things that do change, but it can be just as important to understand those that don't. Perhaps it is time, McGreevy suggests, to stop marveling at the vast array of things that were on the agenda of Vatican II, and ask about those things that weren't and should have been.

One of these is the minor issue of the dignity and rights of half the human race. "Women," McGreevy explains, "barely registered at the Second Vatican Council." This was the era, of course, of second-wave feminism, which could not but impact the Church to its core. The "milieu" had largely been organized by women—remember Mary McAuley—but now that women were working, they were less inclined to spend their free time laboring in an institution that placed them in a subordinate role. Women in this era were beginning to question the institutions, whether domestic or public, that were built upon their undercompensated labor and deprived them of authority. The glass ceiling in the Church remained intact, and efforts to allow women into the priesthood, or even the deaconate, went nowhere.

At the same time, the Church was almost flamboyant in its refusal to countenance the other demands of contemporary feminists, notably around family planning. The whole issue of contraception was punted from the council, and resolved by the pope himself. *Humanae vitae* (1968), which banned the use of artificial contraception, lacked the legitimacy of an ecumenical council while reaching deep into the bedrooms of millions. This was an enormous blow to the Church, and helped create the world we know now, where many Catholics are perfectly aware that they are opting to ignore clear papal guidance. Traditional teaching about divorce was also left untouched, even as divorce laws were being liberalized around the globe.

So, while it certainly helped the Church update its liturgy and accept modern Biblical criticism, the council utterly neglected the issue of women and the family, which would prove to be just as crucial, if not more so. And this was not the only omission. The other explosive issue that was essentially untouched by the council concerned Church hierarchy. "What the bishops had not done," McGreevy judges, "was assess the structures of the church they had inherited." In other words, for all of its celebration of the laity, the council did not inaugurate a thoroughgoing rethinking of the Church's structures of authority. To the contrary, in McGreevy's telling, clerical power—and the power of popes especially—was only enhanced. After all, it was only during and after the council that popes became global celebrities. This unchecked power would soon become a linchpin of the sex-abuse scandal.

Less honest accounts of the modern Catholic Church might end with the election of Francis and tell a sanguine story about the globalization of the Church. McGreevy opts, instead, to devote his last substantial chapter to the sex-abuse crisis—a crisis that, as a matter of narrative, appears as the culmination of modern Catholic history. Why was this the case? Many accounts presume that there is something eternal about the Church's culture of impunity for the powerful. But in that case the interesting ques-

tion becomes: Why did that culture not change at a moment when many other institutions, from governments to universities to sports teams, were becoming more transparent and democratic than ever?

McGreevy does not offer a direct answer to this question, but the great bulk of evidence in his book does suggest one. By the time the council rolled around, the Church had been struggling with a set of questions about modern society for two centuries. One of those questions was always formulated this way: "How should the Church relate to the world?" Hence all the metaphors about the Church throwing open its windows and opening its doors to the world. As for the Church itself, the emphasis had seldom been on reform, but rather on creating a monolithic structure: an ordered house with the capacity to enter relations with the "world." That house would be run by a hierarchy of celibate men stretching from priest to pope, mediated by thousands of hospitals and orphanages and schools and newspapers. While such a house might countenance democracy in the world, it would itself be governed as a monarchy—and would have no need of such revolutionary principles as transparency, or a free press, or clear and public structures of accountability. Such had been the very nature of the ultramontane revolution, which underwrote the Church's enormously successful response to the French Revolution.

This particular model of the Church, for all its earlier success, was disastrously ill suited to the challenges of the later twentieth century. In McGreevy's telling, the sex-abuse scandal was the result of various pathologies that emerged directly from the ultramontane model. Priestly celibacy, like female ordination, was untouched by the council. This, among other factors, led many priests to leave the Church, and to a crisis of recruitment—and this, in turn, led to a global reluctance to dismiss anyone who could fill a cassock. Meanwhile, and especially under John Paul II, the global Church hierarchy was centralizing its power, and McGreevy shows how decentralized decision making, even at the parish level, was floundering in these decades. The outcome was a male-dominated institution, suspicious of sexuality and the press, committed to the authority of the priest and the hierarchy. This was a disaster waiting to happen—and the disaster came, with traumatic consequences for untold numbers of victims.

The Church is going to have to find new strategies, because the ones that worked last time were the preconditions for the current impasse.

While McGreevy's book sometimes feels like a textbook, it's much more than that. It's a gripping story of how one of the world's most important institutions has evolved over the past two centuries. He spans the globe, from the Philippines to Indonesia to Canada, providing welcome polyphony to a story that can often feel hermetically European. We hear the voices of those who dedicated their lives to the poor; we hear the voices, too, of those who suffered at the hands of the Church. This is, by far, the best single-volume history of the modern Church currently available.

And while it's written by a professional historian, McGreevy is also a Catholic who cares deeply about the fate of his Church. He is worried, clearly, but cautiously optimistic. He does not think that the sex-abuse crisis is the last word on the Church. As his book shows, the Church has been in crisis before, and has found a way out. But the Church is going to have to find new strategies, because the ones that worked last time were the preconditions for the current impasse.

It is certainly plausible that, Francis notwithstanding, the global institution will double down on old solutions, with all the risks that entails. In some ways, after all, the Church is just as it presents itself: the rock of Peter, slow to change and with an eternal essence. But at the same time, the Church of today would be unrecognizable to a Catholic born just a century ago. For the institution looks back not only to Peter, but also to the Isaiah who counseled his listeners to "remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old." The Church has for millennia been a global conglomeration of people animated by the frankly revolutionary teachings of Christ, creating an institution that is surprisingly agile and fleet-footed in its response to global crises.

McGreevy's genius is that he shows us both these Churches: the rock and the peregrine, the stolid purveyor of tradition and the agent of revolutionary change. It is anyone's guess which of these will prevail in the crucial decades to come. For no matter how prodigious his gifts, McGreevy's lights as a historian point only backward. The path forward is uncharted, and it will have to be blazed by a new generation of Catholics: a generation more global, and more diverse, than any that has steered the Church before.

JAMES CHAPPEL *is the Gilhuly Family Associate Professor of History at Duke University. He is the author of* Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church *(Harvard University Press, 2018).*

MORE FURIOUS, MORE IRREFUTABLE

Stephen Kampa

Latest fact: it turns out jet contrails aren't governmentally dispensed psychotropic agents
bioengineered to turn the heartland American population gay or autistic or whatever,

but, still, you can feel something barbing the air, a poisonous atmosphere everywhere,
the clabbering of civility, the strange connections between click bait and road rage,

our immediate impatience almost tautologous as words of ungulpable disgust go spilling
like mealy mouthfuls from overstuffed mouths in the war of stuck-up cucks and stupid cocks,

all this tension an electromagnetic field one wanders into and out of a dozen times a day.
We keep reading whatever feed fundamentally ratifies the version of the world we want,

we keep imagining insults more furious, more irrefutable than the ones we imagined
the day before, but mostly we are waiting for a future that, in its cataclysm, satisfies

all of our longing for some vindication of this apocalyptic dread. To have it be nothing—
to have the spurious claims and ramifying counterclaims reduced to a species of pollen,

an irritant, to be sure, but mostly seasonal and ultimately little more than a means
of some irrelevant, inhuman form of propagation—would be the beginning of what

none of us could survive. Not yet unraveled and dissipated, those cicatrix-like contrails
streamline the sky with cataracted redactions. Something cut, something crossed out?

I sort with the thin-lipped factions who see a huge transparent hand double-underlining
letters too large and clear to be legible in the giant invisible sentence hanging over us.

STEPHEN KAMPA *is the author of three collections of poetry:* Cracks in the Invisible *(2011),* Bachelor Pad *(2014), and* Articulate as Rain *(2018). His work has appeared in the* Christian Century, *the* Yale Review, *the* Cincinnati Review, Southwest Review, *the* Hopkins Review, Poetry Northwest, Subtropics, *and* Smartish Pace. *He was also included in* Best American Poetry 2018 *and* Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic *(2020). During the spring of 2021, he was the writer in residence at the Amy Clampitt House. He teaches at Flagler College.*

A Barren Eden

Ecological devastation in Iran's Khuzestan Province

SOLMAZ DARYANI

Oil from Khuzestan Province, in southwest Iran, once lit up cities all over the world. Eighty percent of Iran's oil and gas reserves are in Khuzestan—the first place in the Middle East where oil was discovered. Yet in recent years climate change and environmental degradation have resulted in the displacement of many of the province's inhabitants. In the summer of 2021, during the worst drought in fifty years, temperatures topped 122°F. Those conditions, combined with government mismanagement, led to dust storms and water shortages, provoking violent protests. Hur al-Azim, a Mesopotamian marshland known as the Garden of Eden, is now barren and laden with harmful waste. The Indigenous population living around Shadegan International Wetlands has staged protests to call attention to evaporating water troughs and drying pastures. Local herders, farmers, and fishermen must deal with receding rivers and slowly disappearing lagoons. The photographs on the following pages were taken in December 2020 and September 2021. They document a part of Iran and Iranian society that rarely makes the headlines: a region of desertified land and polluted water; a population whose livelihoods are threatened by environmental forces outside their control. A region that oil once made rich is being slowly devastated by the effects of the world's addiction to fossil fuels.

SOLMAZ DARYANI *is an Iranian documentary photographer based in Iran and the United Kingdom. She is a grantee of the Magnum Foundation, National Geographic Society, and a member of Women Photograph and Diversify Photo.*

ABOVE: Abbas Bohrani stands in front of burned trees in his palm grove on Minoo Island near the Persian Gulf. Drought and extreme temperatures have led to more fires in recent years. "When the palm trees caught fire, I called the fire brigade. But the whole grove had already burned by the time they arrived, and only a few remained out of hundreds. Like my children, these palms were with me for about thirty years, but all of them perished in the fire."

ABOVE: The Bawi family harvests date palms in their grove in the village of Oloveh. According to Abo Ali Bawi, "the fruit of many palm trees has been halved" because of water shortages. Many streams in the town have dried up. Palms need to be watered at least ten times a year, but the family could water them only three times in 2021.

TOP LEFT: Drought and excessive groundwater extraction have caused land subsidence and sinkholes, like this one near the village of Dasht-e Bozorg.

BOTTOM LEFT: Described by UNESCO as "a masterpiece of creative genius," the Shushtar Hydraulic System dates back more than two thousand years to the Achaemenid and Sassanid eras. In recent years, salt sediment has damaged the system because of the Karun River's increasing salinity—another effect of drought.

ABOVE: People living near the Shadegan Wetland rely on water for their livelihoods, whether to irrigate crops or provide water to livestock. Droughts, pollution, and extreme heat have devastated crops and herds and led to blackouts.

TOP RIGHT: A landslide in the Zagros Mountains ruptured an oil pipeline. A river of oil flowed into nearby valleys and farms. After the winter rains, the contaminated soil polluted springs, wells, and groundwater aquifers.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Genzova Choheili, a member of the Mandaean community, prays on the banks of the Karun River. The Karun is the main ritual site of Iran's Mandaeans; for centuries they have been baptized here after major life events—birth, marriage, illness. The banks of the river offer a rare respite to all the inhabitants of Ahvaz, the city with the worst air pollution in the world. But the Karun is now in decline because of overexploitation, droughts, and inefficient dams.

TOP LEFT: Ali Salemi and his son Hussain herd sheep along a small stream of the Karun River, which runs through the fields and smells strongly of sewage. Ali says, "I lost five sheep to contaminated water this year." The Karun is the largest river basin in Iran, but its water quality becomes dangerously bad during the dry season.

BOTTOM LEFT: Industrial and urban wastewater discharges into the Shadegan Wetland. The marshes there, at the head of the Persian Gulf, have long been used for fishing and wildlife conservation, but they have been severely damaged in recent years by drought and oil pollution.

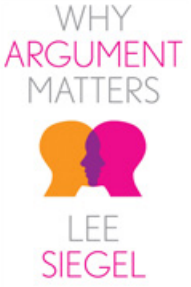
BELOW: Tashkooh ("burning mountain") is constantly ablaze. Its fires are caused by the diffusion of natural gas through the cracks in the ground. Khuzestan Province has some of the world's largest crude-oil and natural-gas reserves, but its land has been ruined by war, mismanagement, and climate change.

Two Sides of Dignity

COSTICĂ BRĂDĂȚAN

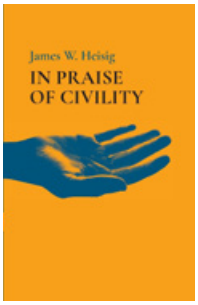
We use language very much like a commuter who has taken the same train to work every morning for years: mechanically, distractedly, almost always with other things on our mind. Once a word, a sentence, or a turn of phrase has done its job, we leave it behind and move on, in the same unthinking way we leave behind the train car when we've reached our stop. Once in a while, however, we miss our stop, or get off at the wrong one by mistake. Our routine has been abruptly broken, and we are faced with a completely new setting—with another face of the world, as it were. We now contemplate everything with fresh eyes, slowly take in the view, and learn a lesson in re-enchantment. A similar thing happens when language makes unexpected stops and words are used with new meanings.

In *Why Argument Matters*, Lee Siegel makes a deliberate choice not to use the word "argument" with the usual meaning of a reason, or concatenation of reasons, that we offer for or against something (an idea, a position, a course of action). Instead, he deploys "argument" in preeminently biological terms: argument is someone's act of assertion against the surrounding world. There is something distinctly non-rational, almost brutal about Siegel's redefinition. The sheer fact of "occupying a space in the world" as human beings is for him "an argument with a society that needs to know we exist." Unlike countless other writers (philosophers, logicians, scientists, legal scholars) who approach argument in terms of internal consistency, empirical evidence, or methodological rigor, Siegel considers it a tool for living, an instrument of adaptation. Above all, he is interested in argument as "the expression of a universal longing for a better life." *Why Argument Matters* is about the roots of argument not in thinking, not in speech, but "in our very existence." Such an argument is "as natural and inevitable a condition of our being as breathing."



WHY ARGUMENT MATTERS

LEE SIEGEL
Yale University Press
$26 | 160 pp.



IN PRAISE OF CIVILITY

JAMES W. HEISIG
Resource Publications
$17 | 136 pp.

This bold change of perspective gives Siegel access to some refreshing insights. "It is nearly impossible to have a rational argument that is not built out of the sticks and stones of emotion," he writes. And so much more than mere emotion, in fact. Most of us would agree that, in his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. made a strong argument for civil rights. But it would be naïve to regard the argument's logical structure or King's "argumentation skills"—considerable as they were—as the primary source of the speech's strength. What made this argument so devastatingly effective was the person of the speaker himself, his personal record and life history, as well as the life histories of those in front of him, on whose behalf he made the argument. The speaker's voice and appearance, his entire physicality, the location and the context of his speech—all of this contributed to the argument's force. Exactly the same combination of words coming from someone else's mouth, or in another place or at another time, might well have fallen flat. Even the truth value of an argument may depend on the existential situation of the one who makes it and of those for whom it is made. For an argument, Siegel writes, "flows from our intuitive certainty that our right to exist is the most fundamental truth, and that our right to exist is bound up with our freedom to think about existence in specific ways."

From this perspective, thinkers' biographies, how they live and how they die, will appear inseparable from their ideas. A philosopher's life and work become one continuous narrative. "Because our very life is an ongoing argument about the value of our life, the way we argue tells a story about who we are," observes Siegel. Central to this approach is, unsurprisingly, Socrates, the man who took argument so seriously that he argued himself to death. The book's "chief aspiration," writes Siegel, is to treat argument "as Socrates ultimately practiced it." Socrates's entire biography was a rigorous, well-conducted, and multifaceted argument, in which he involved not only his friends and disciples, but also his opponents—and, eventually, the whole city of Athens itself. "At the end of his life, Socrates stripped argument down to its essence as a type of transcendent fusion of language, meaning, feeling, and action." He celebrated the argument's conclusion with a drink, in the privacy of his prison cell, surrounded by a handful of loyal, mournful friends.

Why Argument Matters proudly bears the mark of the twenty-first-century Western liberal democracy within which it was born. That shows in the book's thesis and conception, in its rhetoric and prose style, and even in the examples the author

Martin Luther King Jr. gives his "I Have a Dream" speech during the Freedom March in Washington D.C., August 28, 1963.

BETTMAN/GETTY IMAGES

uses. "Argument is hope, sometimes at the chessboard and sometimes in the boxing ring," states Siegel at one point. Informed as it is by an ethos of toleration and civility, the book suggests that a boxing match may be the most violent form of argument we are ever likely to encounter. We may passionately argue ourselves into existence, but we do so in one safe setting or another, in the pages of the *New Yorker* or *Harper's*, in a fancy café, or with a group of friends in their apartment. Siegel unfolds his argument largely within the confines of his own contemporary liberal civilization, where everybody is nice, well-mannered, and well-behaved, and where the most brutal thing we might witness is a pugilistic event. Mind you: not a street fight or a bar brawl, but a well-regulated bout. Don't get me wrong. When Siegel writes that "to exist is to argue your existence," I think he makes an important point. But is a gathering of writers in Manhattan or even a boxing match in Las Vegas really the best place to test that point?

In his *Kolyma Tales*, Varlam Shalamov recalls a particularly low moment in the Gulag where he spent seventeen years: "At the age of thirty I found myself in a very real sense dying from hunger and literally fighting for a piece of bread." That he survived to describe this moment is proof that Shalamov was able to "argue himself into existence" again and again in the direst circumstances. Similarly, writing about his internment at Auschwitz in *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi notes: "Our language lacks the words to express this offence, this demolition of man.... We've reached the bottom. Lower than this we cannot go, a human condition more miserable cannot exist, is unthinkable." Demolished though he was, Levi managed to argue himself back into life, and lived to tell his tale.

For someone dragged to the brink of extinction, as Shalamov and Levi both were, the notion that "to exist is to argue your existence" is not just a theoretical pronouncement. It can be the recipe for survival, the one idea that keeps you going. When Stalin or Hitler—or Putin—decides to make a very practical argument against your life, arguing yourself into existence takes on a completely different meaning and a new urgency. That survival under such circumstances is possible is the best argument imaginable for Siegel's insightful idea. A discussion of how human beings manage to argue themselves back into existence even as they face the counter-argument of a firing squad or gas chamber would have brought some more depth and drama to his book.

James W. Heisig's *In Praise of Civility* offers a second example of a familiar word being used in an unfamiliar way. "Civility" is usually associated with a form of polite social interaction. It is urbanity at work—a mark of "civilization." Heisig, however, gets off at another stop. The civility he praises in his book is not what dictionaries mean

by that term. It is not good manners or proper decorum or something else of that kind. In fact, Heisig struggles to formulate his own alternative definition. He refers at one point to "a whole constellation of impressions, recollections, and images that you can walk around in without ever being able to put it all into words—or ever really seeing the need to…. Civility is like that."

Instead of a neat definition of civility, Heisig devises a rough method for recognizing it: "You know civility when you see it. It is one of those things you feel in your bones before you can analyze it or put it into words." The method—"thinking in anecdotes," Heisig calls it—consists of recounting stories, from his own life and the lives of others (real or fictional), and mining them for meaning. Unscientific as this method may be, it is more than suitable for its purpose: the pursuit of wisdom. Through stories and fables and anecdotes, wisdom *becomes flesh*; that's how we can touch it and it can touch us. From the anecdotes about the Cynic philosophers to the *apophthegmata* of the Desert Fathers to the koans of Zen Buddhism to the stories of the Sufis or the Hasidim, wisdom has often reached us in this narrative form.

Heisig certainly has some stories to tell. An uncommonly learned scholar, he works in both Western and Eastern philosophy, Christian theology and Buddhism, comparative studies and interfaith dialogue. He writes in, and translated from, several languages. While he has been based in Japan for the past several decades, he has lectured all around the world, and has a loyal following in several countries. No wonder that, when it comes to "thinking in anecdotes," Jim sensei is a masterful performer. The stories he shares are not just gripping, but pithy and positively edifying. Mixing self-deprecation and a keen sense of observation, Heisig tells us how he learned about civility as he lined up to take an elevator in a department store in Japan, helped an elderly lady cross a busy street in London, received help from a donkey driver in Crete, acted as an interpreter for a distinguished Japanese philosopher in Bologna, or tried to pull the leg of a young monk at the Ryōan-ji temple in Kyoto. He also retells colorful stories from *The Arabian Nights*, tales of Buddhist monks, Zen masters, good caliphs, and others. The result is a gem of a book, as entertaining as it is wise, a work in which storytelling and philosophizing become one and distinctions between genres and disciplines are gleefully discarded.

What initially seems to be a defeat—Heisig's failure to find a satisfying definition of civility—eventually turns into a triumph. Having spent some time with Heisig's anecdotes, we emerge better prepared to understand not only what civility is but how it works in practice. For the most important thing about civility, in Heisig's view, is its unobtrusive performance: "Civility is not the acquisition of a certain fund of knowledge or a certain capacity for good judgement. It is an art that needs practice and refinement." This may be just another way of saying what a difficult thing civility is. As a "quest of the invisible, the inaudible," it belongs to the elusive domain of nuance. True civility, hating to draw attention to itself, prefers to remain inconspicuous. Pursue it a trifle too insistently and it's gone: you've been uncivil. Strictly speaking, civility can't be pursued at all—at least not in the way we pursue other things. Our role is only to let it happen, to make room for it. Civility, writes Heisig, gives us "the chance to get over ourselves." It is not so much "something *we do*, but something that *happens* when we get over ourselves and get out of the way." Indeed, it would happen "a lot more if we just got out of the way until it was clear that we were needed."

As one reads Heisig's reflections on civility, one often gets the feeling that he is referring not to something ordinary, but to an exceptional state of mind that borders on saintliness: "Civility is a form of love," he observes at one point. To be truly civil we need to rid ourselves of any pettiness and narrow-mindedness, of egotism and selfishness, and embrace extreme humility instead. "Genuine civility is radically selfless." In short, Heisig's resignification of civility is so drastic as to make the concept almost unrecognizable. If you no longer find ordinary civility in his account, it's because there is almost none there. To be civil in Heisig's sense is next to impossible, just as Nietzsche thought it was next to impossible to be a true Christian.

In Praise of Civility is a short book, and given its "unrepentant reliance on stories and anecdotes," it may seem like a simple one. But it's not. Its apparent simplicity is a deliberate disguise. Behind the easygoing, accessible façade, this is a profound study of the human condition. Civility may appear to be a minor philosophical topic, yet Heisig places it at the center of a web of reflections on what makes us human and what can compromise our humanity, on the neglected importance of prejudice in life, on routine and the "ability to see through the surface of things without losing sight of the surface," on our mortality and finitude, and on the fundamental role of storytelling in the construction of our identity: "We invent ourselves anew each time we tell a story. To our last conscious breath, the whole story is forever in the making." Heisig's argument for civility is both subtle and compelling: by letting civility happen—knowing when to get out of the way—we take better care not only of others and of the world itself, but of ourselves. Such care can save us, if anything can.

Siegel's argument-as-a-form-of-self-assertion may seem the opposite of Heisig's civility as "radical selflessness." On closer inspection, they are complementary. They are invisibly tied together as two aspects of the same quest for a dignified life. When pushed down, we preserve our dignity by arguing ourselves into existence. But in situations where arrogance and graceless self-assertion are the path of least resistance, we can retrieve our dignity by lowering ourselves and embracing "civility" in Heisig's highly demanding sense.

COSTICĂ BRĂDĂȚAN *is the author, most recently, of* In Praise of Failure: Four Lessons in Humility *(Harvard University Press, 2023)*.

What's the Ius?

DHANANJAY JAGANNATHAN

The stated aim of Adrian Vermeule's *Common Good Constitutionalism* is to restore American legal theory and practice to its roots in classical law, the mix of legal sources that dominated American jurisprudence from the Founding until some point in the twentieth century. Things began to go wrong, he tells us, with the arrival of positivism, which took root in alien soil. According to Vermeule, positivism—the view that the normativity of law arises from the will of authorized magistrates—comes in two forms: the originalism of legal conservatives, which fetishizes the text of the Constitution; and the progressivism of left-liberals, whose hopes rest on judges authorizing an ever-expanding list of rights with the goal of unfettered autonomy.

Vermeule's understanding of the foundations of classical law is also distinctly Roman Catholic, though he doesn't explain in this book how this other set of texts and traditions—including canon law, papal decrees and encyclicals, and Catholic social teaching—fits into the American legal matrix of English common law and Roman law. Many of the book's claims, especially those having to do with natural law, are accompanied by quotations of Catholic thinkers ranging from St. Thomas Aquinas to the Cistercian monk and blogger Pater Edmund Waldstein.

This mix of sources and modes of thinking—and levels of expertise—leads to an uneven experience for the reader. When it comes to topics squarely within his academic competence, especially administrative law, Vermeule cites case law and legal scholarship in careful detail (though much of this material can be found in his earlier work). But when it comes to explaining the Thomistic account of natural law or the Catholic Church's teaching on subsidiarity, he repeats the same buzzwords over and over again with the incantatory brio of a Harry Potter spell (*determinatio!*) and offers citations to blog posts, dressed up in the endnotes as if they were scholarly monographs or law-review articles.

COMMON GOOD CONSTITUTIONALISM

ADRIAN VERMEULE
Polity
$19.95 | 270 pp.

To show that positivism is wrongheaded, Vermeule first presents a hybrid descriptive-and-normative theory of law as essentially directed to the common good—that is, the collective flourishing of a political community. He then provides a series of applications to legal controversies ranging from same-sex marriage (bad) to environmental protection (good). The problem is that it isn't always clear why the common-good theory of law—the ancient and medieval consensus view that Vermeule attributes to the Founders and subsequent generations of American legal theorists right up until the First World War—leads to the conclusions that he wishes to draw. When he starts drawing those conclusions, there is too little argument and too much polemic.

Vermeule's analysis is not only historical. He also takes pains to explain his view in terms of more recent philosophical debates about the nature of law. Here Vermeule firmly aligns himself with the moralism of Ronald Dworkin and against the positivism exemplified by H.L.A. Hart. In Dworkin's view, we cannot make sense of what legal actors do without reference to the moral principles that guide their activity. Positivists such as Hart, by contrast, take the authority of law to rest on social customs and a division of labor: some people are granted authority to set, to interpret, and to implement the rules of the legal system, which all are then bound to follow.

But the Hartian legal positivist distinguishes between the normativity of law and the normativity of morality: deciding whether any particular law *should* be followed remains a moral and not a legal matter. Vermeule does not mention this important distinction in the positivist position. He argues that in thinking about the American constitutional and legal system (and, indeed, any other such system) we must have

GIFTLEGACY/ISTOCK PHOTO

due regard for *ius*, the whole of justice or right, and not only *lex*, the explicitly stated body of laws, including the Constitution. But the Hartian positivist is a positivist only about *lex*. That seems like a position Vermeule could easily accommodate. His foray into the philosophy of law seems unnecessary for his points about constitutional interpretation—his true concern in this book.

As I noted, Vermeule's positive theory of law as directed to the common good is both descriptive and normative. Each of these aspects is connected to a critique of his opponents. His primary criticism of originalists is descriptive: he believes their entire project is built on self-deception. Obsessed with the text of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and other documents of the founding generation, they claim they are only applying the original meanings of these texts to the array of practical problems that come before them, including ones the Founders could scarcely have imagined. They claim they are *not* taking a prescriptive moral stance in their rulings. But insofar as they are devoted to interpreting the law, together with the principles that animate it, they will inevitably have to do so. They will have to draw on the moral principles that are already encoded in the Constitution and in statutes, which were framed so as to bring about the common good (or, to borrow the phrase from the Constitution's preamble, "the general welfare"). Originalists, then, are just covert moralists.

But Vermeule also has a normative critique: statutes, judicial decisions, and regulations that carve out an ever-expanding zone of autonomy for the individual (or for corporations) fail to bring about the common good. This erroneous expansion of liberty is his core complaint about both progressives and libertarians. Vermeule believes that it's incoherent to assert that certain rights are absolute, since rights get their meaning from—and can be justified only with reference to—the common good. He acknowledges that progressives argue for their views on moral grounds, just as his own "living constitutionalism" does, but he claims that their moral vision is implausible and at odds with the principles of natural law.

There are two serious problems with Vermeule's criticisms of progressivism. The first is that the progressive position he outlines is obviously a straw man. He claims that the vision underwriting the civil rights championed by progressives is one of untrammeled autonomy from all unchosen bonds, including those of family and nation. But no progressive that I know thinks the point of, say, protections from race or gender discrimination is increased autonomy; the point is to shield people from longstanding and ongoing unjust treatment. The focus on autonomy is part of a libertarian, not a progressive, approach to social relations, an approach that makes contract and tort the stuff of social life. It is telling that Vermeule does not quote any actual progressive thinkers, while he accords a good deal of space to engaging with the nuance of different flavors of originalism.

Over and over, Vermeule points to *Obergefell v. Hodges* as the paradigmatic progressivist decision, but at no point does he stop to explain why the recognition of a right to marry should be thought of as an *escape* from unchosen bonds. Marriage, after all, is a conservative institution, which recognizes the role of the community, and indeed of the state, in regulating the basis of family life. No doubt Vermeule regards same-sex marriage as an escape from traditional gender roles, but the existence of non-procreative heterosexual marriages and of adoption already reveals marriage and family life generally to be a complex site of both voluntary and non-voluntary affiliation. Again, it would be implausible for progressives to favor same-sex marriage on libertarian grounds, since there is, arguably, nothing libertarian about the institution of marriage in the first place.

Here Vermeule's second complaint about progressivism becomes relevant—the claim that the progressive drive toward ever-increasing individual autonomy runs contrary to natural law. Unfortunately, Vermeule does not explain what he takes natural law to be or how it might militate against the civil-rights program at the heart of progressive politics. Does Vermeule think that slavery, for example, is contrary to or consistent with natural law? After all, the abolition of slavery—and later the dismantling of Jim Crow—provided much of the impetus for the social-justice movements to which modern American progressivism is the heir, as did advocacy for labor laws that restricted the exploitation of workers by companies and bosses. (Vermeule, to his credit, warmly endorses such labor laws.)

It is instructive to consider Aquinas's position on the question of slavery. Roughly speaking, he took slavery to be a creation of positive law that was consistent with the precepts of natural law. But the very idea that there can be legal institutions that *render* slavery just suggests that the natural law doesn't always provide us with the grounds for verdicts about the justice of particular social arrangements. Indeed, the Thomistic scholar and ethicist Jean Porter argued, years before *Obergefell*, that the natural-law framework can be understood to offer support for same-sex marriage, despite its originators' condemnations of homosexuality.

The relationship between natural and positive law is complex, as is the moral status of the social institutions that serve particular ends in a given society. Determining what is natural to human beings and what is conducive to their flourishing can be even more complicated. Yet, on these important topics, Vermeule falls silent. Whether that is because he takes his view of natural law to be uncontroversial or simply because he has not thought through these issues very deeply, I do not know. But his failure to address them makes his brief against the "unnatural" goals harbored by progressives little more than a polemic. It may rally his loyal followers, but it won't add to their number.

DHANANJAY JAGANNATHAN *is an assistant professor of philosophy at Columbia University. His essays on politics and the common good have appeared in* Breaking Ground, Earth & Altar, *and* Plough Quarterly, *and he co-writes the Substack* Line of Beauty *with Tara Isabella Burton.*

Failure to Thrive

VIVA HAMMER

From time immemorial, the human population on Earth has been remarkably stable. Over extended periods and many generations, the number of births almost perfectly equaled the number of deaths. Women bore many children but most were lost before reaching adulthood. Plagues, famines, and infections kept populations in check, and some control over births was exercised through abstinence, breastfeeding, and infanticide.

About three hundred years ago, this all began to change. Plagues became less frequent and less virulent. Sanitation and nutrition improved. And in some small, rural villages in France, toward the end of the eighteenth century, couples began to systematically limit the numbers of children they birthed. We don't know how they achieved this or why; we know that birth patterns changed in a way that can be explained only by deliberate control.

The reduction in human births and deaths—the "Demographic Revolution"—has touched every community on Earth. The French controlled births before they controlled death and so the French population grew slowly in the nineteenth century. The British brought their births under control a century after the declines in mortality, and in the century in which births outstripped deaths, the British Isles exploded with people who spread out over the empire.

The Demographic Revolution isn't over. Humans are still in the midst of dramatic reductions in both births and deaths, as Paul Morland explains in *Tomorrow's People*. Morland is a senior member of St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford, and this is his second popular book on demography. He cuts through the complexities by telling a story of the human race in ten numbers: infant mortality, population growth, urbanization, fertility, aging, old age, population decline, ethnic change, education, and food.

Morland shows how different mixes of births and deaths within and between countries are shared through migration, and what that means for the future of nations and states. And although the developed world is fixated on living as long as possible, Morland shows that our future depends not on extending life spans, but on the birth rate, which continues to decline. Group survival is determined by the production of children. At a time of almost perfect birth control, births are no longer determined by biology, but by culture and, particularly, religion—any and all of them—because most religions promulgate the idea that life is worth reproducing. In a world that is dominated by secular values, there is only one developed country birthing enough children to replace its adults. (Have you guessed which? Read on to find out.)

Why do we moderns wish to live forever but not wish to have children? Morland can't answer this question; no discipline has been able to answer it. But he gives us a view of what happens to countries when its people live ever-longer lives and have ever-fewer children.

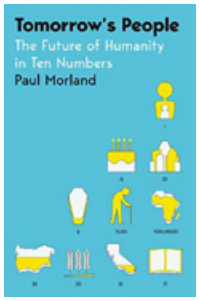
Morland's story begins with death at birth. In Swedish villages two hundred years ago, more than 40 percent of infants died within a month of birth. Who can imagine such loss? And yet this rate of death was typical worldwide. Today, the U.S. infant mortality rate of 5.5 per 1,000 is high compared to Western Europe's, but that's half what it was in 1980. Eliminating death at birth has been the largest contributor to quality and quantity of life. Women today *everywhere* give birth with some confidence that they will survive the birth and that their babies will survive to adulthood.

When mothers know their children will outlive them, birth rates usually fall. Usually, but not always. In Africa, Morland tells us, couples have large families even though their infants mostly survive to adulthood. High rates of African births in the face of reduced mortality have confounded expectations. The quantity of children still counts more than the quality of the child's life, and the religious structures prevalent across Africa support large families—not only because their women are mostly illiterate and poor. In Bangladesh, in contrast to Africa, dramatic drops in birth rates were achieved even while women were illiterate and poor.

African children will make up most of the growth in the human race in the next hundred years. No other conti-

NANCY ANDERSON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

An Orthodox Jewish family walks together at Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem, Israel, 2016.



TOMORROW'S PEOPLE
The Future of Humanity in Ten Numbers

PAUL MORLAND
Picador
$28 | 304 pp.

nent has enough children to replace the adults. India's historically high birth rate has fallen to mere replacement level. Even after ending its one-child policy, China is struggling with ultra-low birth rates long experienced in the rest of Asia. Europe has had below-replacement childbearing for a generation and the Americas, including the United States, have arrived there too.

Why is there only one developed country with enough children to replace its adults? A woman in Singapore reveals possible motivations to Morland: "Why bother having kids when a child-free life is so much easier?... All those sleepless nights, dirty mornings, shit and piss everywhere." Unsurprisingly, Singapore has an average of one child per woman, but it is hardly an outlier. Even countries with pronatalist religions—Italy, Spain, and Greece—are approaching one child per woman.

Two hundred years ago, Morland tells us, the British spread their excess population over Africa and Asia. Now Africans are sending their young adults to the developed world. The rich world relies on immigration from poor countries to keep their lands from emptying. Morland notes that this will bring enormous ethnic changes to the receiving countries. Continuously absorbing people with different outlooks and histories can put a strain on even the best-run countries, but nations without enough births that also cannot absorb outsiders turn into populations of the old and immobile.

In the United States, Morland finds two places with enough children to replace their adults: Utah and South Dakota. This is clearly a result of Mormon teachings that do *not* forbid contraceptives but that *do* celebrate large families. It seems that the attitude toward birth control is less important to birth rates than attitudes about "sleepless nights" and "dirty mornings."

Morland doesn't dig deeply into the connection between faith and family size. But I have been studying parents of large families of varying faiths for two decades and have found some common themes. "Faith makes you optimistic," a father of five told me in Atlanta. An English-born mother of four in Jerusalem agreed. "You want to have a family. There are a certain amount of risks—some don't have even the first! But there's inner faith that you'll have the strength to deal with it."

A mother of eleven in the Midwest puts the high birth rates of the faithful in a larger context: "Because there's something holy in a life—life is precious," she says. "We were sharing in creation.... It's counter-intuitive: this is life, and eleven children is copeable and you can give each love and attention as you would for an only child." She admits it wasn't easy. "At the time that I was going through it, there were many times where I wished I wasn't pregnant again and then I remember thinking: which kid was it I wished wasn't born? I truly believe that this was part of God's plan, and I am very grateful for what I went through."

Throughout human history, what we consider "old age" was a rarity and children were unavoidable. Modern humans think of old age as inevitable and having and raising children as too difficult. The net result, Morland shows, is that our species is growing older and more peaceful, but also more risk-averse and more anxious about child rearing. Our lives are so structured and planned that finding the right spouse and collecting enough resources to raise a child is beyond our means. We are afraid of climate change, pandemics, wars, and inflation. Even though we are the healthiest, most materially rich, longest-lived humans ever, we are increasingly anxious about continuing life.

Among developed countries, Morland identifies one exception to the trend—a nation in which the birth rate is three children per woman despite existential threats and political instability, urban crowding, technological innovation, and rapidly increasing wealth, a nation whose two major religions are equally enthusiastic about children. That country is Israel. It may be an oddity, but political scientist and demographer Eric Kaufmann (a mentor to Morland) thinks Israel may be a harbinger of a world in which child-centered cultures prevail.

One British mother of five I interviewed who raised children in both England and Israel was able to compare the two countries' attitudes. She said that in Israel "the whole social structure is geared to families…there's a much more vigorous, active approach to families rather than fitting them in where career comes first. It doesn't mean time *is* different in reality, but certainly the approach may be."

The humanity that Morland describes, aging and failing to reproduce, brings to mind the letter Jeremiah wrote to the exiles, who were also apparently failing to thrive:

> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.... Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord (Jeremiah 29:5–9).

Morland makes a persuasive case that those who will inherit the Earth are not the fittest of us, but the ones who have the courage and faith to keep having children. The risks have always been there. Only now we have the hubris to believe we can eliminate them. Our anxieties are today's false prophets. There is no greater risk to us as a group than the failure to have children, but there needs to be some reason for individuals to take on the "sleepless nights" and "dirty mornings." So far, only religion has provided those reasons, beginning with a blessing: "Be fruitful and multiply."

VIVA HAMMER, *formerly of the Joint Committee on Taxation in the U.S. Congress, is currently at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute of Brandeis University, where she is completing a book,* Child Desire: Large Families in a Small Family World.

Old Towns, New Havens

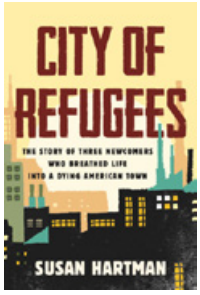
TOM DEIGNAN

The "three newcomers" in Susan Hartman's intimate, powerful new book are Sadia, an outspoken, effervescent high-school student from Somalia; Mersiha, a talented, ambitious chef from Bosnia; and Ali, a reserved, devout translator from Iraq. They have made their arduous way to the "dying American town" of Utica, New York, which became "a refugee magnet by accident" in the 1970s, when a local resident partnered with Catholic Charities in nearby Syracuse to resettle hundreds of Amerasians from Vietnam.

First and foremost, *City of Refugees* reminds us how important small and mid-size cities are to the American fabric and future. When it comes to twenty-first-century industry and assimilation, L.A. and New York—nations unto themselves, really—have their role to play. Places like Utica—Dayton, Buffalo, Youngstown—have a different, though no less essential, job to do.

Hartman's portraits are extraordinary, at times poignant, at other times unsettling or shocking, since her subjects carry with them immense traumas. At fourteen, Sadia's mother was "fleeing civil war, running toward the Kenyan border…two months pregnant." Mersiha's husband, meanwhile, felt it was merely "a question of time before (I was) killed," following the 1995 slaughter of thousands at Srebrenica. And Ali's translation work for the U.S. military once earned him a menacing note tucked into an envelope containing "two AK-47 slim-tipped bullets."

These refugees bear painful baggage, but they also bring the kind of energy and ingenuity earlier immigrants drew upon to make Utica a vibrant industrial town in the 1950s, when the population rose to around 100,000. But then industries began to downsize or collapse. "We started to hear about dads being laid off," recalls prominent public-opinion pollster John Zogby, the Utica-born son of a Lebanese immigrant. By the 2000s, the city's population had dwindled to 60,000, with immigrant "newcomers mak[ing] up about a quarter of Utica's population," according to Hartman.



CITY OF REFUGEES
The Story of Three Newcomers Who Breathed Life into a Dying American Town

SUSAN HARTMAN
Beacon Press
$27.95 | 256 pp.

What can Utica—and the "life" that Mersiha, Sadia, and Ali breathe into it—teach us in our jittery, post-industrial age? *City of Refugees* is more a human portrait than a policy paper. Still, there are clear indications that local governments can and should cultivate immigrant contributions—an eminently sensible suggestion, though one complicated by America's acute case of immigration schizophrenia. On the one hand, we lionize the hard-working immigrants trying to achieve the American Dream; on the other, they're reviled as a drain on public resources.

The sight of Sadia and nearly twenty Somali Bantu relatives living under one publicly-subsidized roof, or newly-arrived Muslims converting an old Methodist church into a "soaring mosque" might personify the American Dream for some. But it scares the star-spangled pants off others. "Every refugee," Hartman writes, "accesses public assistance," and is also given a furnished apartment, thanks to federal and state money overseen by a local nonprofit. This is easy fodder for xenophobes, and we don't hear much about such challenges in *City of Refugees*.

It would be refreshing to discover that a "nation of immigrants" tolerance has taken hold in Utica. One local does boast that his Italian immigrant grandfather sold lemon ice treats

Burmese monks fleeing exile are resettled in Utica, New York, April 2010.

REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

up and down these streets. Hartman's archival research confirmed that Sadia's home was "owned by a succession of families since the 1920s: native Uticans, Italian immigrants, then Bosnian immigrants, reflecting the changing makeup of East Utica."

In the end, though, we can't ignore the fact that Hartman's "newcomers" have settled in an angry nation tearing out its thinning existential hair, a country wracked by disagreements about its past and future. Though unmentioned, Utica's congressional district voted for a certain wall-building, Muslim-banning presidential candidate in 2016. And again in 2020.

For what it's worth, this is not new. Smaller cities across the industrial Northeast and Midwest were very receptive to the anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic overtures of 1920s nativists. "Klan Posters Conspicuous," reads one *New York Times* headline from October 1926, over a story filed from Utica.

Hartman does spend some time exploring twenty-first-century conflicts. Ali's girlfriend questions the "separation between the sexes" at the local Islamic center. We learn that Ali supports Donald Trump. Hartman also highlights tensions between immigrants and some local African Americans, who feel "the refugees have been given opportunities—and support—not available to them."

Readers inclined to (proudly, virtuously) sympathize with Hartman's subjects must also accept the fact that such folks—and their children and grandchildren—are not likely to be multigenerational political progressives. Many past immigrants and their children eventually voted with paranoid nativists, mainly because of broader, emotionally charged issues such as crime or anti-communism. Similar shifts in this generation of immigrants are already underway. To wit: Trump not only twice won Utica's congressional district, but his Democratic opponents garnered an uninspiring 40 percent of the vote in both presidential elections.

All of this deserves more attention in *City of Refugees*, and such analysis would help to show how Utica fits into a broader regional or national story. This might have pushed Hartman's book closer to the lofty heights of her genre set by the likes of J. Anthony Lukas's *Common Ground* or Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*.

Catholic immigrants and their descendants could especially benefit from a clear look at their own history. As part of a lawsuit, filed in March, the conservative group CatholicVote argued that "American Catholics deserve to know the full extent of the U.S. government's role in funding and coordinating with Catholic church affiliated agencies at the border." In other words: Are you now, or have you ever been, complicit with the various forces threatening American civilization?

Hartman's *City of Refugees* deftly undermines the baseless paranoia of all of this. The book may not change the tenor of our nation's messy immigration debate, but it should—and it could, if people (starting with angry Christians) would stop screaming and just look and listen.

If they did, they'd see Sadia struggling through her final high-school days. They'd marvel at Mersiha's riveting, inspirational journey from war-torn Bosnia to Croatia, from *Cake Boss* fanatic to whirlwind entrepreneur. All the while, she is raising a son, who she hopes will become "a doctor or go into cybersecurity…an expanding and lucrative field." The son, of course, has different plans. Immigrant parents might struggle to accept this, but they also know this is one of the reasons why they set off on their journeys, and put in eighty-hour weeks making pastries or selling lemon ice. There's an important rule immigrants generally follow, wherever they come from. As Mersiha puts it: "I always work, work, work."

TOM DEIGNAN, *a regular contributor to* Commonweal, *has written about immigration and history for the* Washington Post *and the* New York Times. *He is currently researching a book about Ellis Island.*

Jesse Ball

Read in One Sitting

ADAM FLEMING PETTY

Writers love writing about themselves. Indeed, one could argue that's simply what writers *do*, no matter the subject at hand. A novel about nineteenth-century homesteaders? A study of microbial bacteria? Both can be a means for a writer to follow her obsessions and find herself. When it comes to contemporary literary fiction, writers tend to stay closer to home. The protagonists of many novels are thinly veiled versions of their authors, as in *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood or *Fake Accounts* by Lauren Oyler. Perhaps the most famous recent example of this approach is Karl Ove Knausgaard, whose *My Struggle* functions as autobiography in all but name, detailing the travails of Karl Ove across six increasingly weighty volumes.

AUTOPORTRAIT

JESSE BALL
Catapult
$20 | 140 pp.

Why all the navel-gazing? Are writers today more self-involved than before? Surely not; literary self-involvement is, like gravity, a constant throughout the universe. The likely cause is structural rather than personal. In a cultural moment where artists are, rightly or wrongly, concerned about appropriating identities other than their own, staying within the lane of one's own self sidesteps the possibility for giving offense. Call such novelists self-absorbed, call them solipsists, but you can't cancel them. Well, not for their novels, at least; other behaviors could always attract the public's ire.

Of course, not all novelists stay within the lane of their identity. Jesse Ball, born in 1978, veers into the incoming traffic of differing selves with astonishing prolificacy. The author of almost twenty books, including novels, volumes of poetry, and collections of drawings,

LIN WOLDENDORP

There's a certain arbitrariness to this kind of autobiographical writing. Anything could be included, and often is.

Ball inhabits whichever kind of character strikes his fancy. *Samedi the Deafness* follows a young man who gets caught up in a madcap scheme to render the whole world deaf; *How to Set a Fire and Why* is about a teenage girl who falls in with a group of anarchists. He writes in an absurdist, fable-like register, his books reading less like contemporary fiction and more like obscure fairy tales passed down from forgotten cultures. Even *Silence Once Begun*, which does feature a protagonist named Jesse Ball, escapes the gravitational pull of realism almost immediately. His alter ego travels to Japan after the end of a relationship. There, he investigates the strange case of a man who confessed to a crime he didn't commit. Think Philip Roth crossed with Haruki Murakami.

But Ball's newest book, *Autoportrait*, is firmly realistic. Indeed, it's not even a novel, autofictional or otherwise. It's a memoir, filled with finely observed details and sharp little anecdotes. But that's about as far as the similarities to other memoirs go. It figures that Ball, author of unconventional novels, would write an unconventional memoir.

In an author's note, Ball states that his approach to memoir is one "that does not raise one fact above another, but lets the facts stand together in a fruitless clump, like life." Flip through the pages, and you see what he means. There are no chapters, no page breaks, no sections demarcated with an asterisk. *Autoportrait* unfolds in one long, unbroken paragraph, like one of those European headache novels by Thomas Bernhard or László Krasznahorkai. But the sentences in those novels are long and meandering, with multiple switchbacking clauses. Each sentence in *Autoportrait* offers a brief glimpse into Ball's life and personality: his preferences, his habits, his experiences. Strung together, these sentences create a kind of strobing effect, as disparate images across vast stretches of time are condensed into a single, recursive loop.

Some sentences achieve the status of aphorism: "I have never known a cruel person to become gentle and kind, though I have seen the opposite thing take place." Some are like jokes: "My middle name is William. I find this to be an imposition." And some are perfect gems of observation, as when Ball describes one of his ears going deaf. He visits a nurse, who removes a huge blockage of wax from the ear. "The hour following this was one of the most beautiful of my life: I could hear again, almost supernaturally."

As insightful as some of the individual sentences are, the book achieves its fullest effect in aggregate. *Autoportrait* is the kind of book best read all at once, in a single sitting, during a lazy afternoon. The time spent reading the book becomes unusually full, like the episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* where Picard gets zapped by an alien probe and lives out the entire lifespan of a long-dead scientist over the course of just a few hours. *Autoportrait* immerses you deeply in another's experience for a short while, then returns you back to yourself.

Appropriation is vital to Ball's literary practice. Much of his style involves lifting the techniques of certain European writers and filtering them through his own perspective as an American who feels very much out of place in his country of birth. Kafka and his heirs—writers like Robert Walser and Daniil Kharms—are the most important to Ball. Such writers are fundamentally subtractive, reducing fiction to its bare essence. The results often appear like fairy tales without a moral, or jokes without a punchline. One of Kharms's very short stories begins, "There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears." The story keeps stripping this poor man of every last trait, until he's not even there anymore. It ends: "So we don't even know who we're talking about. It's better than we don't talk about him anymore." An off-kilter fable that ends with a flourish of black humor—it's easy to see the influence on Ball.

The form of *Autoportrait* also takes its cue from another European writer. The author's note states that Ball explicitly took the idea from French writer and photographer Édouard Levé, who also wrote a book titled *Autoportrait*, which also consists of many different memories and impressions compiled into a single, book-length paragraph. Levé was very fond of such high-minded stunts. For *Amérique*, a photographic project, he visited small towns in the United States named after famous European cities (Oxford, Mississippi; Berlin, Maryland) and photographed strangers who agreed to pose for him in places like restaurants and grocery stores. Many of them stare directly into the camera with blank expressions, perhaps uncertain as to why this funny Frenchman wants to take their picture. Levé would likely appreciate Ball's appropriation were he still around to read it. But Levé took his own life in 2007, shortly after delivering a manuscript titled *Suicide* to his editor.

Perhaps the foremost practitioner of this pointillist approach to autobiography was the American artist and writer Joe Brainard. *I Remember*, from 1970, consists of a series of statements, each of them beginning with the words in the book's title. "I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world," writes Brainard, a child of the 1950s. "I remember juke boxes you could see pick up the records." Framed so simply, the torrent of memories reaches an incantatory register, each one flowing into the other. Reading *I Remember* makes you want to try out the exercise for yourself, scribble the title on a piece of paper and see what memories it summons.

There's a certain arbitrariness to this kind of autobiographical writing. Anything could be included, and often is. But the lack of an overarching narrative means that the reader comes away with

a strong sense of the author's personality, perhaps even more than in a more conventional memoir. Levé, for example, gives one a strange sense of both revelation and privacy, as if the more he tells you about himself, the more mysterious he seems. Brainard acquits the role of the friendly, cheerful American with panache. Even the saddest passages in *I Remember*—the deaths of friends, Brainard's struggles with growing up gay in Eisenhower-era America—only bolster the can-do optimism of the book. Ever the Boomer, Brainard is always looking on the bright side.

What do we learn about Ball's personality? He is, in a word, cranky. He prefers to be alone. He hates cars, exercise, organized religion. He likes trees. He likes musical instruments, considering them to be humanity's highest achievement. He hates his phone, even though he writes his books on it. At one point he writes, "My political views are so outlandish that almost no one agrees with me. Therefore, I prefer not to talk about politics." A genuine European misanthrope like Bernhard might leap at the chance to detail his outlandish views, but Ball keeps many of his beliefs to himself—an unusual move to make in a memoir.

I've been reading Ball for years and consider him an immensely talented *novelist*. But his gifts for invention, absurdism, and fable simply lend themselves better to fiction than to nonfiction. Indeed, one could even say that a novel allows Ball to portray more personal material drawn from his own life than a memoir—or *this* memoir—does. *Autoportrait* makes a few passing references to Ball's brother and the role he played in his life. We learn that his brother became a quadriplegic at some point and that he died at a young age. But an earlier novel gives, in fictional form, a much stronger sense of Ball's brother, and of Ball's relationship with him.

Ball's younger brother was named Abram. He had Down syndrome. When he was young, Ball expected he would grow up to become his brother's full-time caretaker. But following a series of illnesses, Abram died at a young age. These events, alchemized into fiction, form the basis for *Census*, a moving, personal novel. In the story, a father is near death, and he wishes to go on one last journey with his son. The son is the fictional analogue for Abram, although it is never specified that he has Down syndrome. The son is the hollow core of the story. Rarely directly portrayed, he is seen from the perspectives of secondary characters. We see the effects his presence has on them. As father and son travel across a bare landscape, the father acting as the census-taker for a Kafkaesque bureaucracy, citizens and village residents react to the son, some of them with curiosity, others with hostility, while the son himself never says a word. Such tricks of perspective can easily feel too clever for their own good, but in *Census* they serve the aim of the story perfectly. The son becomes an object of mysterious gravity—much as Ball's brother was in his own life.

Census ultimately feels more personal than *Autoportrait*, arising as it does from a relationship, from one life enmeshed with another. The quality of intimacy on display in the novel counts for more, finally, than the quantity of anecdotes in the memoir. That's not to say there's no point in reading *Autoportrait*. Just the opposite, in fact. I came away from it with a new appreciation for the mystery of creativity, of the unseen ways the imagination works. If you read *Autoportrait* before reading any of Ball's other work, you'd never guess what kind of novels he's produced. Unlike so many autofiction writers working today, Ball filters his own experiences through his prodigious imagination, producing strange work that feels almost familiar, like half-remembered stories from childhood. His work reminds us that, even in this age of the personal, the relationship between real life and good art remains a mystery.

ADAM FLEMING PETTY *is the author of a novella,* Followers. *His essays have appeared in the* Paris Review Daily, Electric Literature, Vulture, *and other outlets. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

POETRY

EVENTIDE

Michael Stalcup

And still, every night,
You transfigure with love
these waters above
into wine.

MICHAEL STALCUP *is a Thai-American missionary living in Bangkok, Thailand. His poetry has been published in several magazines, including* Commonweal, First Things, *and* Sojourners. *You can find more of his work at www.michaelstalcup.com.*

By and By, Lord

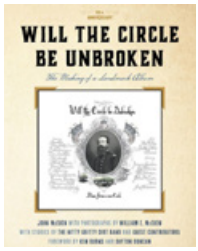
STEVE FUTTERMAN

Roy Acuff performing his first tour with the Grand Ole Opry outdoors in 1939

There were three acts on the bill, each a headliner in his own right, and the top admission price was two dollars. In what now seems like an alternative universe, the Schaefer Music Festival, held in a repurposed ice-skating rink in New York City's Central Park, presented concerts all summer long, featuring a superlative and eclectic array of acclaimed musical acts. I feel as if I lived in or around that magical rink for the better part of each summer of the early 1970s.

This particular concert took place on August 15, 1973. Doc Watson opened the show, followed by the Earl Scruggs Revue, with David Bromberg closing the evening. Nearly sixteen years old, I had been going to shows for three years already, but I had never seen any of the performers featured that night. Why was I even there? My passion was rock music. A few of the first acts I had already seen—the Doors, the Who, and Led Zeppelin—gave a clear indication of where my interests lay: loud, electric guitar–based classic rock, if a decade before it was designated "classic." So what brought me to a show spotlighting three figures whose acoustic-based music spoke firmly of authentic bluegrass, country, and folk roots?

The answer was the album *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, a triple-LP set recorded two years previously in Nashville and released in November 1972. *Circle* was a crossover project that brought together the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, a folk-rock unit with Los Angeles roots that had scored a top-ten hit with "Mr. Bojangles" in 1970, alongside a host of country and bluegrass legends including "Mother" Maybelle Carter, Merle Travis, Roy Acuff, and Jimmy Martin, as well as Doc Watson and Earl Scruggs, accompanied by such first-rate Nashville session players as the fiddler Vassar Clements, the bassist Junior Huskey, and the guitarist Norman Blake. The music-making throughout was masterful, the integration of supposedly incompatible cultures untraceable, the synthesis joyous and ultimately moving. It was an unlikely union that Dirt Band banjo player John McEuen memorializes in his book celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of that occasion: *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: The Making of a Landmark Album*.



WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN
The Making of a Landmark Album

JOHN MCEUEN; PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM E. MCEUEN
Backbeat Books
$38.99 | 264 pp.

For open-eared pop-music fanatics of the seventies, *Circle* was a gateway album that revealed vistas. It spoke of a world beyond the sonic eruptions of rock-and-roll, yet one that could exist peaceably alongside it. The unassuming splendor of the music I heard that night in Central Park, particularly the marvelous flatpicking and straight-from-the-hills singing of Watson and the offhand brilliance of Scruggs's banjo playing—indeed, the seemingly effortless, stirringly unselfconscious virtuosity of both men—brought to life the pleasures of a new idiom, one I still cherish. It was the joy already embedded in that momentous album come to life.

Antecedents for the project were actually abundant. The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, the Flying Burrito Brothers (with the stylistic pioneer Gram Parsons at the helm), the Band, the Grateful Dead, and, of course, Bob Dylan, among others, were already infusing elements of country and bluegrass into their sound. But where these artists suggested their influences, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band went straight to the source.

What made *Circle* special was the privileged tier it accorded the guest performers. Dirt Band members can be heard adding idiomatic playing and occasionally taking a

ROBERT DYE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

convincing lead vocal, but the spotlight remains firmly on the veterans, who by and large perform repertoire for which they are well known. The tunes—mainly older songs associated with the guest artists, or in the case of those featuring the Dirt Band, Hank Williams—are rendered with acoustic instruments in traditional arrangements. Such unadorned performances spoke with a force and passion that the roots-influenced rock artists could only hint at in their own recordings. It was obvious to anyone hearing it, no matter their familiarity or knowledge of country or bluegrass, that here was the real thing, unvarnished and unmistakable.

The highlights pile on one after another: Doc Watson having himself a time with the country hit "Tennessee Stud"; Merle Travis picking and singing a low-keyed "I Am a Pilgrim"; Earl Scruggs and John McEuen's banjo duet on "Soldier's Joy"; Jimmy Martin's boisterous take on "You Don't Know My Mind"; Roy Acuff's aching "Pins and Needles (In My Heart)"; Vassar Clements's dash through "Orange Blossom Special," as well as his sweet and swirling work throughout the album, to highlight just a handful of these vibrant, unpretentious performances.

The best of them all—certainly the most affecting—may be the numbers featuring the matriarch of country music, "Mother" Maybelle Carter of the pioneering Carter Family. Her wavering pitch only increasing her expressiveness, and her unblemished guitar and autoharp bringing it all back to the music's beginnings, Carter commands lovely versions of "Keep On The Sunny Side," "Wildwood Flower," and "I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes." When she, Martin, and Acuff split the verses on "Will The Circle Be Unbroken"…well, there aren't any words.

Recalling the impressive detail of the original album's artwork and packaging, McEuen's book boasts exceptional photographs of the 1971 recording sessions by the album's ambidextrous producer, William E. McEuen—John's brother, better known as Bill. Through their intimate nature, these pictures capture the rapport and spontaneity that characterize the historic encounter. McEuen's comments on each of the tunes, combined with contributions from other Dirt Band members, paint a vivid—if maddeningly repetitive (did someone forget to invite an editor to the party?)—portrait of an intensely creative six-day session. But if it leads you back to the original album, the book has served its purpose.

McEuen and company bring the same humility and sense of awe to their recollections as they brought to Nashville fifty-one years before. There they were surrounded by musical royalty, heroes and heroines who had molded them; pop-music ego trips, it was certain, had no place in that studio. And it seems from everyone's memories that those legends were equally gracious and committed. (This includes Nashville potentate Roy Acuff, who, once he overcame his initial reluctance to record with the longhairs from L.A., found his own firm place among the proceedings. The tale is well told—and succinctly—in the sixth episode of Ken Burns's 2019 documentary, *Country Music*, which spotlights the historic recording session.) Bill McEuen's inspired decision to keep snippets of studio patter embedded in the album catches the warmth and ease of the sessions. The exchange between Watson and Travis as they meet for the first time is as exalted as any music fan could wish for.

Eloquent short essays by Marty Stuart and Gary Scruggs (Earl's eldest son) attest to the album's impact on artists on both sides of the musical fence. For, as Stuart asserts, Nashville wasn't exactly in the artistic purity business at the time. "As country artists, we are best when we're at home with our natural selves," Stuart writes. "The record shows that it has often been the fond gaze of notable people from outside the walls of country music who've recognized the beauty and relevance of what we often overlook or leave behind in search of more lucrative pastures. The kindness of strangers has often led us back home." As he rightfully states, "everybody won."

Upon release, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* was critically lauded (coverage in *Rolling Stone* magazine initially led me to it), and it sold well—ultimately going platinum. The best-selling soundtrack to the Coen brothers 2000 film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, echoes *Circle* in its inspired melding of contemporary artists and revered elder figures, cementing the then-burgeoning Americana movement. Yet *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* should be seen as so much more than just a historically significant antecedent. In many ways the album acts as an addendum to the first two epochal albums by the Band: 1968's *Music From Big Pink* and 1969's *The Band*, as well as Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* from the same year. These were recordings, made during the height of the Vietnam War, amid intense generational and racial divisions, that suggested a tentative rapprochement between youth culture and established traditions, or at the very least an acknowledgement of collective American roots—albeit from a strictly white perspective.

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band put these ideas into practice. They may not now have accrued the hip cachet of, say, a Grateful Dead or a Gram Parsons, but these eager and willing cultural adventurers deserve a collective pat on the back, as do their illustrious and equally committed guests. Fifty years on, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* remains timeless and instructive, especially in our current period, riven with seemingly intractable dissenting voices. While it will take a lot more to cool down the nation than singing an old country song in harmony, it might not hurt. As John McEuen recalls of those enchanted sessions: "It would be music to the ears of thousands of folks out there, a salve for the soul, a coming together of the ages, in a space where time stood still, with no agenda other than 'get it right the first time.'" They did.

STEVE FUTTERMAN *has written about jazz for the* New York Times, *the* Washington Post, *and* Rolling Stone *and for the past three decades has contributed the weekly "Jazz and Standards" listings for the* New Yorker.

I'll Take New York

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK

This past summer and fall, as workers across the country resumed their commutes and began dutifully filing back to their offices, I decided to spend a few months working remotely at a friend's house, located in a small ski town in the Colorado Rockies. My surroundings were idyllic. Soaring peaks, some taller than 14,000 feet, would often glow pink with the setting sun; thick green forests of pine and aspen, which had just begun turning a brilliant, fiery gold, hosted a seemingly infinite network of hiking trails; and a nearby creek, whose clear, flowing waters were often occupied by paddlers and fly-fishers, snaked right by the house on its way into town. The whole place was a peaceful outdoor paradise—conducive, my thinking went, to the type of work that we do at *Commonweal*.

I had everything I needed. My friend's home contained a dedicated office, which became my library, conference room, and podcasting studio. Her adorable new puppy, preternaturally well behaved, kept me company during Zoom calls and editing sessions. On bright blue afternoons, I'd sit outside in an Adirondack chair on the porch, reading submissions as friendly neighbors, one a *Commonweal* subscriber from Texas, played fetch with their dogs at the park across the street. If I ever got restless, I could simply drive over to a nearby coffee shop, or take the bus to the local co-working space, which boasted a restaurant, gym, fitness classes, and an entire room of outdoor equipment for rent—a "seamless blend of work and play," according to the brochure. I didn't avail myself, but I was glad to know it was there.

Everything seemed perfect, like a snow globe custom built for remote workers like me. Inexplicably, though, I wasn't happy. The work itself was going well—I was about as productive as I'd been in the office in New York—but I felt increasingly disconnected. It wasn't so much that I was missing anything crucial: many of my colleagues were also working remotely (and happily) from locations across the country. It was that subtly, without my being aware of it, a split had begun to develop between my working and personal lives. Gradually, instead of reading, writing, or editing, I found myself distracted during the day, more interested in the trail run I wanted to do that afternoon, or the camping trip I was planning that weekend. Work came to feel like an obstacle, something that prevented me from taking up the countless outdoor opportunities offered by my alpine surroundings. Why care about the war in Ukraine or synodality with the bright Colorado sun shining down on millions of acres of unexplored terrain?

In the recent sci-fi series *Severance*, on Apple TV, a group of employees at Lumon Industries, a faceless biotechnology corporation, elect to undergo a brain procedure that "severs" their memories of their working lives from their personal ones. Each worker acquires two separate identities: an "innie" who stares at a screen and pushes paper all day in the office, alternately reprimanded and rewarded by cynical supervisors, and an "outie" who returns home in the evening, unaware of having spent the day at work. The show's central question is whether "severance" constitutes liberation or enslavement, whether our work selves are really separable from our whole selves. It thus satirizes current debates about the future of office work even as its protagonist, Mark (Adam Scott), articulates a provisional response: "We're people, not parts of people."

I don't doubt that working remotely really works for some. No more commute, the possibility of relocating to where the cost of living is lower,

Passengers wait for the train in New York City.

LERONE PIETERS/UNSPLASH

the freedom to spend time with kids and pets or run errands at any time of the day: these are good things (for those, it must be said, who *have* jobs that can be done remotely). But conversations about remote work often assume an adversarial or outright hostile relationship between workers and their employers. *Don't bring your whole self to work*, some argue. *Quit quietly, do the bare minimum*, others urge. This attitude overlooks an important point, because it's an understanding of work that is only half true. What if you had a job you really liked? What if, instead of competitiveness and misery, you found collaboration and joy? What if you belonged to a truly inclusive "team," one dedicated to a common project aligned with your values?

This can sound like a luxury, or a fantasy, but it doesn't have to be. Catholic tradition calls it "vocation," in which a person's talents and desires meet the world's needs. Work, in this sense, isn't just something you do to satisfy your material obligations, though that's part of it. Work is valuable because it confers meaning and dignity. It's also an invitation to self-transcendence—which is pretty near impossible if you think that being a worker means simply arranging everything to meet *your* needs, *your* preferences, *your* convenience.

Somehow I must have intuited this, because just as the Colorado foliage neared peak color and snow began dusting the upper elevations in the mountains, I left—a month earlier than planned—and drove back across the country to New York City in four days. The twinge of sadness I felt at leaving such beauty and ease was tempered by the anticipation of being re-immersed in the grit and thrum and unpredictability of city life. It's easy to romanticize life in New York, but things are decidedly not perfect. In my time away, moths took over the better part of my apartment. There's garbage strewn about my neighborhood. The traffic has gotten much, much worse, and everything has gotten even more expensive.

Subtly, without my being aware of it, a split had begun to develop between my working and personal lives.

But with the friction and inconvenience I seem to have recovered a certain integrity, a correspondence between my job and the life I lead outside the office. I'm here not simply because I care about the city and its institutions or because I'm energized by the people who inhabit it (though of course I do, and I am). I'm here because I'm grateful to show up, in person, to do work I really care about, alongside colleagues who are also something more. Their presence, and my presence among them, doesn't just help me grow into a better, sharper, more capacious version of myself. It reminds me that I'm part of a project that helps me forget about me.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK *is an associate editor at* Commonweal.

Two Poems by Elizabeth Poreba

His love endures forever.
Psalm 136

also wrath because
opposites exist
though the brain
has no patience
with this —

denuded hills
slide seaward
ancient pines
buckle in flames
brackish waters
swill over
house tops —

nothing is safe
yet secure
in the brain case
the idea of safe
endures

You are worth more than many sparrows
Luke 12:7

He said and every word oscillates,
beginning with *You,* a shaky proposition,
and *are,* a temporary condition
and as for *many sparrows,* how many,
a few or star quantity?

At least the sparrows provide
some credibility, being visible like us,
also here for no apparent reason,
preoccupied with their business,
and just as hungry and clueless.

ELIZABETH POREBA *is a retired New York City high school English teacher. Her work has appeared in the* Southern Poetry Review, *the* Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, *and* Commonweal, *among other print and online publications. She has published two poetry collections,* Vexed *and* Self Help: A Guide for the Retiring *and one chapbook,* The Family Calling. *Her work can also be found in* This Full Green Hour, *an anthology published by the One O'Clock Poets.*

Join the Ignatian Legacy Fellows Program

IGNATIAN LEGACY FELLOWS

To accompany a community of men and women in the second half of life on a year-long pilgrimage as they reimagine and renew their sense of meaning and purpose using the tools of Ignatian spirituality and discernment.

Cohort 3 forming now for travel to begin in February 2023

Apply now: **ignatianlegacyfellows.org**

Call Mariann McCorkle at 301-807-5369 to learn more.

PARTNERING INSTITUTIONS

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO · BOSTON COLLEGE · SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY · GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

CONVERSATION STARTER SERIES

A discussion guide for local communities

Complete series ($25) and individual topics ($5) are available for download.

Visit **cwlmag.org/css**

Start a Conversation with the 2022–2023 CSS!

Commonweal's **Conversation Starter Series** is an ideal discussion guide for fostering thoughtful dialogue in your classroom, parish, book club, or Commonweal Local Community.

Each topic of the series has been chosen by *Commonweal*'s editors and writers, and includes an introduction to the topic, reading materials, discussion questions, and suggestions for further reading.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

1. *Abortion*
2. *Synodality & the Laity*
3. *Building Bridges with the LGBTQ Community*
4. *Women in the Church*
5. *War & Conflict*
6. *'Traditionis Custodes'*
7. *A Dorothy Day Charism*
8. *Climage Change & Ecological Conversion*

Download now at cwlmag.org/css