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LETTERS

Love transcending the law

LOVE & LAW

The article on Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's spiritual struggle to reconcile his Catholic convictions about abortion with the demands of his public legal responsibilities ("A Christian in the Office of Constitutional Judge," January) calls to mind the parallel struggle of many German bishops and citizens to make sense out of the 1992 German law concerning abortion and the Vatican reaction to their participation in the public program. The law allows a woman to have a legal abortion in Germany within three months of conception if she can produce a certificate to show that she has received counseling at one of the country's 1,600 pregnancy centers. More than two hundred of these centers were run by the Catholic Church, which allowed the opportunity to offer those seeking abortion not only information but also physical, psychological, occupational, and financial help. The certificates made abortion penalty-free, but they did not cause or persuade any woman to have an abortion. Some Catholics rejected this interpretation despite the claim of many bishops that 25 percent of the women counseled in their centers decided to continue their pregnancies.

Notwithstanding the resistance of these bishops, Pope John Paul II ordered German bishops to close all centers run by Catholics where certificates were issued. Bishop Franz Kamphaus was the only bishop to get permission to continue his counseling center where more than half of the women seeking abortions decided to continue their pregnancies.

In reaction to the Vatican prohibition, the Association of Donum Vitae ("Gift of Life") was formed in 1999 with its own leadership and support. The pro-life effects were noteworthy, yet the Vatican continues to impede their actions.

The pastoral intervention of the bishops and later by Donum Vitae complemented Böckenförde's efforts. At these Catholic centers, a woman and her "fertilized ovum" acknowledged by Böckenförde could receive compassion and respect. Here their dignity became real and practical and no less spiritual. Love transcends the law.

William Paul Haas
Glastonbury, Conn.

A TOUGH READ?

Paul Baumann did a disservice to your readers who have yet to read former President Barack Obama's memoir ("Looking Down from the High Ground," February). The reviewer labels this book "a very tough read." Hardly. The book is fabulous, an easy read with great details and background on many of the challenges in Obama's first term. Not only is the book complete with details on issues, but Obama also shows a consistent respect for everyone who assisted him in the issues he faced; he even pays respect to the White House butler who clears his table.

The book deserves a better review. It's hard work to write a book of this caliber; it's easier yet to be a critic.

Jane Galvin
D.C.

THE FIRST CASUALTY

Susan Bigelow Reynolds makes many excellent points on the vague and often flawed framing of the pandemic in the language of war ("A People, Not an Army," February). Yet there is some overlap. The Defense Production Act, which the former president avoided fully enacting, could have saved countless lives. The casualty rates, as in most wars, disproportionately affected people of color. But unlike war, galvanizing cathartic events that acknowledge the scale of the loss and suffering have been largely absent. And most tragically, perhaps, social cohesion and resolve in facing a common enemy was relentlessly subverted for political advantage. As the Romans noted, "The first casualty of war is truth." And now, a pandemic-ravaged country must crawl out from the pall of manufactured untruth.

R. Jay Allain
Orleans, Mass.

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LETTERS

ORIGIN STORIES

What a rich harvest have been your winter issues! Denys Turner's treatment of Julian of Norwich ("All Will Be Well," February) does more than respectfully read Hume and put Plantagina in his place. If the (accumulating) Christian story enables its believers to make coherent sense and meaning of their world and life, as do traditional peoples' origin stories, then they (and all Abrahamic faithful) can thank God for such grace without feeling the need to claim even more for their revelations.

This magnifies Luke Timothy Johnson's reviews of Christian Smith on atheism and Robert C. Koerpel on Maurice Blondel ("Religion Booknotes," January). Of course atheistic humanists realistically need something like the Abrahamic (or Vedantic) story for a grounding premise, but hardly need to apologize for that. As Morten Høi Jensen's Camus says ("Without God or Reason," January), "the mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions," even if it chooses values from its own (or other) origin stories. Christian Smith's "yes" to humans' having a natural capacity for religion recognizes our inclination toward understanding ourselves in some coherent narrative, combined with an aptitude for ritual community. Younger generations seem ready to appreciate even their own traditions' still-resonant stories and symbols.

The (Christian) dynamism of ritual community is wonderfully wrought by Jeff Reimer's treatment of *For the Time Being* ("What Comes After," December). I read his Auden as urging believers "neither to abandon" their story "nor to seek to re-enter it" via forced factualism—an escapist "denial of our contingency"—but to account for the world "as it is." Thus, with Julian, we can be grateful for our origin story's continuing power "in the meantime."

Thank you, *Commonweal*, for sustained nourishment in retirement!

Stephen M. Johnson
Verona, N.J.

NOW I CAN SEE THE MOON

Denys Turner's masterful piece on the problem of evil challenged me to consider my position. I ruminated on Kant, Eckhardt, Barth, Camus—you name it. Then a single line from my wife's *Little Book of Zen* leapt out at me: "Barn's burned down. Now I can see the moon."

I don't know why there is pain and suffering and evil in the world, but I do know—if we're quiet enough and patient enough with it—there is opportunity there. And therein, I think, lies God.

Philip Taft
Hopewell, N.J.

STAGE PRESENCE

I started to read John Paul Rollert's article to see what I might learn about empathy ("Going to Extremes," February). But his account of the Stanislavsky-Meisner approach to acting sent me to a rather different place. When he quoted Meisner's description of acting as "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances," I recognized the challenge I face every day when presiding at liturgy. Ideally, when celebrating Mass, I should be fully present to God and to his people. In reality, it is rarely so. So daily I struggle to "live truthfully under imaginary circumstances"—not merely to recite my lines, but to deliver them as if I were really where I am not. This may be one appeal of the Tridentine liturgy for both priests and people: the style of the celebration conceals from the people (and perhaps from the celebrant himself) the gap between where we are and where we are pretending to be (without any intent to deceive). Maybe acting should be a required course in the seminary, so that we might better and more honestly play our part as presiders in liturgy. Here, the danger of entering too fully into the role one is playing might actually be a blessing.

Fr. Dohrman Byers
Mount Orab, Ohio

Going Big

The $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (ARP) signed into law by President Joe Biden on March 11 does more than bring necessary relief to the millions of people who have suffered economically during the pandemic. With its myriad and wide-ranging provisions, it might very well restore faith in the government's ability to deliver large-scale programs that improve people's lives.

Signed one year to the day after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the ARP includes broadly popular measures to combat the health crisis itself and to ease the economic devastation that lockdowns and stay-at-home orders have caused. Funds for vaccine distribution and testing, money for state and local governments, loans for small businesses, and aid to schools to help them reopen safely will help communities get back on track. Another round of relief checks, the extension of $300-per-week unemployment benefits, and rental, mortgage, and food relief will allow those whose livelihoods have been affected by the pandemic to feed themselves and their families and to remain in their homes.

The ARP's broad popularity is striking: according to a CBS/YouGov poll, three out of four Americans support it, including 46 percent of Republicans. Yet not a single Republican in Congress voted for the legislation. For a time it also seemed possible that disagreements between factions within the Democratic Party might threaten the bill's passage. But in the end conservative, moderate, and progressive Democrats demonstrated that they were capable of working together—and of overcoming Republican intransigence—when it mattered most.

The ARP's most progressive provisions target long-standing structural inequities in our economy, emphasizing care for children and families in particular. The law includes an enormous increase in the child tax credit while expanding eligibility; the bill is expected to reduce childhood poverty in the United States by half. The ARP also expands financial assistance for coverage under the Affordable Care Act, and provides funding to help people who have lost their jobs keep their health-care coverage.

GOP legislators have complained that the legislation contains too many "liberal wish-list" items that are too widely distributed to be properly characterized as pandemic relief. But that's precisely the point. The measures Republicans deride as gratuitous are those meant to address poverty more fundamentally, so that, when the next economic crisis arrives, fewer Americans will find their lives upended by it. Another strength of the bill is that, rather than pitting the middle class against the poor or treating those on "welfare" as a drag on the economy, it ties the well-being of Americans together—in contrast to Donald Trump's signature tax-cut giveaway that overwhelmingly benefited the wealthy. This is a philosophical shift as much as a policy achievement: the ARP is perhaps the single greatest expression of solidarity in American politics since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

The bill is not perfect. Because the budget-reconciliation process was used to pass the ARP—reducing the number of votes required to pass in the Senate from sixty to fifty—the Senate parliamentarian ruled that a federal minimum-wage increase could not be included. The money delivered to individuals through relief checks is subject to collection by creditors. Most important, many of the bill's provisions—the extension of the moratorium on evictions, increased unemployment benefits, the child tax credit—will expire without further legislation to extend them or make them permanent.

That makes it all the more important for Democrats to make clear to the American public just how significant an achievement the ARP is. They must also make sure its rollout is as smooth as possible (no Obamacare-website crashes this time). And they cannot let Republicans control the terms of the public debate over the bill's provisions or the benefits it will bring. Democrats already have the majority of the country on their side. The best way to pass similar laws in the future, and to ensure a full break from the discredited austerity politics that has worsened the lives of so many Americans since the 1980s, is to remind people of the good that the government—and only the government—can do, of what can be achieved politically when citizens care for each other. As Biden said on the night of March 11: "We need to remember the government isn't some foreign force in a distant capital. No, it's us. All of us. We, the people." —*March 18, 2021*

Biden & the Border

Just two months after the end of Donald Trump's presidency, the U.S.-Mexico border is again at the center of national attention. Whether you call it a "surge" or a "crisis," many more migrants—including unaccompanied minors—are arriving each day from Central America, exceeding the Biden administration's capacity to handle the flow. Border Patrol recorded more than a hundred thousand "encounters" in February alone, the highest in two decades.

On the surface at least, Biden's response to the uptick looks a lot like Trump's. Most single adults and families, some with infants and young children, are being expelled immediately to Mexico under Title 42, a public-health rule implemented at the beginning of the pandemic by the Trump administration. But some adults and families apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley have been flown eight hundred miles away for deportation in El Paso, with a few families inadvertently separated on either side of the border. This alone is alarming. Even worse is the fact that there are now more than four thousand minors in federal custody. They are held first in Border Patrol detention cells, then in crowded Health and Human Services facilities as they await placement with sponsors elsewhere in the United States.

The reasons for the increase are complex. In addition to the poverty, crime, and corruption in the Central American countries from which the migrants are fleeing, the Biden administration points to the recent hurricanes in Honduras, which displaced thousands, along with the economic disruption caused by the pandemic. Sensing a political opening for the 2022 midterms, Republicans have placed the blame squarely on Biden, denouncing his administration's friendliness to migrants as an open invitation to illegal immigration and stoking fears of "super-spreader caravans" traveling through "open borders."

So far the Biden administration has failed to counter this incendiary rhetoric convincingly, or adequately explain the rationale for its actions, which include dispatching FEMA to the border for ninety days. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, himself the son of immigrants, waved off language of "a crisis," but acknowledged the "difficult situation." He has pledged to ensure border security while maintaining the administration's commitment to "address the plight of children as the law requires, and enable families to be together."

Such statements undersell the real humanitarian good that the Biden administration has done at the border since January. The most important change is the practical restoration of the right to asylum, which had effectively been abrogated by the Trump administration's cruel (and cynically named) "Migrant Protection Protocols." Also known as "Remain in Mexico," this policy forced thousands of legitimate asylum-seekers, including unaccompanied minors, to wait for processing on the Mexican side of the border. Now, instead of being released into the hands of smugglers or thrust back into squalid street camps, these minors are finally being allowed to cross into the United States. The Biden administration has also restarted the Central American Minors program, granted temporary protected status to Venezuelans, and ended an agreement with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that had dissuaded potential sponsors from taking children in.

But more is needed, and it simply isn't true, as some defenders of the administration have claimed, that the Democrats have "no good options" on immigration. Scrapping the Senate filibuster could enable passage of the Citizenship Act, which provides a path to legality for 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. This is a very good option, the best available, and if the Democrats choose to forgo it, they will have no one to blame but themselves.

—Griffin Oleynick

Myanmar's Coup

Myanmar's military has been using deadly force against demonstrators protesting the February 1 coup, when democratically elected civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint were removed from office and arrested. The bloodshed reached a new level on March 14, when almost forty protestors were killed in Yangon and martial law was imposed. As of this writing, nearly 150 people have been murdered since the coup, and thousands more have been arrested in cities and townships across the country.

The coup was orchestrated by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who has long had a rocky relationship with Suu Kyi and was reportedly worried that she might investigate the sources of a fortune meant to support his plush retirement. He baselessly declared her party's landslide reelection in November 2020 the result of fraud, named himself acting president, and has since charged her with the crimes of owning illegally imported walkie-talkies and accepting bribes of $600,000 and 11 kilograms of gold (the latter accusation remains unsubstantiated). Suu Kyi, of course, is intimately familiar with Myanmar's history of military violence and oppression. She was a leading figure of the opposition during a long period of military rule in the late twentieth century, and spent a total of fifteen years under house arrest between 1988 and 2010. When she wasn't being detained, she traveled the country advocating for peaceful democratic reform. For these efforts, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. When Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy

(NLD), won the country's first competitive elections in 2015, she became Myanmar's "state counsellor," the country's de-facto civilian leader (she was barred by the military from officially serving as president). To many Burmese people, "the Lady" (or sometimes "Mother Suu") is an icon, and their continued devotion to her is evident in the current protests.

But internationally, Suu Kyi's stature has waned in recent years. When allegations surfaced in 2017 that the military was engaging in genocide against Rohingya Muslims, she not only refused to condemn the violence, but also appeared in person before the International Court of Justice to defend the military's actions. She asked the court to dismiss the case, claiming that the violence had been brought on by the Rohingya themselves, and that Myanmar's own military-justice system was capable of dealing with any allegation of atrocities. Some observers have argued that Suu Kyi adopted this position as a pragmatic political move to appease the military, but in fact she has made negative comments about the Rohingya for years, and before the coup her racist position actually helped her gain ground among nationalists who usually voted for the military.

Western governments have strongly condemned the February coup and its leaders. Shortly after the overthrow, President Biden imposed sanctions on top military officials, which he extended to Min Aung Hlaing's adult children on March 10. Companies inside and outside Myanmar are boycotting military-supported businesses. But China—which shares a 1,300-mile border with Myanmar and has significant economic influence and a strong manufacturing presence—supports the military government and urged a crackdown on the uprising after Chinese factories in Myanmar were targeted by protesters. Nevertheless, the international community can expand sanctions to pressure the military, particularly by targeting financial institutions or industries the military relies on for funding. Suu Kyi has proved to be a flawed leader, both in her human-rights record and her inability to negotiate a lasting power-sharing agreement with the military, but she remains the most viable alternative to the country's military dictatorship—and a source of inspiration to millions of her fellow citizens seeking a return to democracy.

—Isabella Simon

Stopping the Vote

After losing a presidential election, political parties typically engage in a certain amount of reflection over what went wrong: their candidate's strategy is debated; their messaging gets revamped; their national leadership is replaced. But that's not what Republicans have done following Joe Biden's defeat of Donald Trump and their party's failure to keep control of the Senate. Instead, they've undertaken a fierce assault on voting rights, an effort the *Washington Post* describes as "potentially amounting to the most sweeping contraction of ballot access in the United States since the end of Reconstruction."

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, Republican lawmakers have "carried over, prefiled, or introduced 253 bills with provisions that restrict voting access in 43 states" since the beginning of the year. Many of these measures take aim at the temporary expansion of early and mail-in voting during the pandemic, which helped drive the largest voter turnout in more than a century. (The *Washington Post* estimated that an astonishing 73 percent of the 2020 electorate voted before Election Day.) In Georgia, for example, Republicans are seeking to repeal no-excuse absentee voting and reduce Sunday voting—the latter move obviously made with African-American churchgoers in mind. Florida and Arizona are trying to curtail absentee voting. Other states might require photocopies of driver's licenses as verification for mail-in ballots, limit voting hours, and kick people off of voting rolls.

While many of these laws have been proposed in key battleground states, Republicans are pushing for them even in parts of the country they firmly control. The *New York Times* reports that the Iowa state legislature recently passed a bill "to cut early voting by nine days, close polls an hour earlier and tighten rules on absentee voting, as well as strip the authority of county auditors to decide how election rules can best serve voters." Why? State Sen. Jim Carlin put it forthrightly: "Most of us in my caucus and the Republican caucus believe the election was stolen."

Absurd as it might seem, Republicans are supporting these laws in the name of election security, driven by the deranged belief that Trump actually had a "landslide" victory stolen from him. There is no evidence for this; in fact, the 2020 elections went remarkably smoothly given the circumstances. Time and again, courts rejected the Trump campaign's lawsuits alleging election fraud. Those clinging to such a ridiculous belief have been reduced to pathetic conspiracy theories—about rigged voting machines, say, or stacks of ballots suddenly appearing or disappearing. None of it is true.

Rather than trying to win over more of the electorate, Republicans are trying to create the electorate they want—a part of their strategy of minority rule. That makes it essential for Senate Democrats to join the House in passing the "For the People Act." The sweeping federal legislation would override state laws that attack voting rights, increasing access to the ballot and mandating that congressional districts be redrawn by independent commissions. During a recent speech, Trump called the bill a "disaster" and a "monster." His acknowledgement of the threat it poses to Republican schemes was, for once, no lie.

—Matthew Sitman

Rudy Giuliani in Philadelphia, November 7, 2020

CNS PHOTO/EDUARDO MUNOZ, REUTERS

RITA FERRONE

Against Lying

The Church should be a living witness to the truth.

We're seeing an epidemic of lying in America. In fact, it's gotten so bad that I wish we would hear more preaching on the Eighth Commandment. You know, the one that tells us not to bear false witness against our neighbor.

The most alarming symptom of this epidemic is the spread of the "Big Lie" that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election—a lie he and his political allies continue to propagate. But more fundamentally his whole presidency legitimated and instrumentalized habitual lying as a political tool. The more often lies are circulated, the more distrust grows. In the absence of truth, the door is thrown open to conspiracy theories and fantasy.

The problem is not just Trump lawyers Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell pushing baseless claims on television, or MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell making deranged videos that purport to prove voter fraud. It's also the sinking feeling that we have drifted into a disorienting "post-truth environment" where the difference between fact and fiction no longer matters.

I admit that politics has always been rampant with temptations to spin the facts. But nowadays it has become easy to reach beyond garden-variety exaggeration or prevarication and go for outright lies. It's the Trump ethos. The more brazen the untruth, the better. When politicians model themselves on Trump, they become impervious to facts. For example, the *Washington Post* recently reported on a whole string of blatant falsehoods that Madison Cawthorn (R-N.C.) employed during his campaign for Congress. He claimed that he was going to attend the Naval Academy when, in fact, his application had been rejected. He said that he was accepted by Harvard and Princeton; this too was untrue. Did his friend really leave him for dead at the scene of his terrible accident? The friend and the medics who aided him deny it. Beyond flagrant misrepresentations of his own personal history, he also lied about others in order to advance his career. He won votes by using a manipulated video clip of his primary opponent that totally misrepresented her views, then traveled to the southern border of Texas and

proclaimed that thousands of American children were being kidnapped by drug cartels and sold as sex slaves, "one of the greatest atrocities I can imagine." Except that it never happened.

Another newcomer to Congress who strives to emulate Trump, Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.), has likewise been called out for telling tall tales. Her oft-repeated account of why she began to carry a firearm is a prime example. A man was "beaten to death" in front of her restaurant, she says, and seeing him victimized so brutally made her feel the need to protect herself. Horrible, right? What really happened, however, was that the man died of a drug overdose in an alley several blocks away. The story earned her three Pinocchios from the *Washington Post*, and was debunked by the fact-checking website Snopes. She remains unfazed and unrepentant.

Why does moral opprobrium no longer attach to lying? Have we forgotten that bearing false witness is wrong? How could it be possible that Donald Trump lied to the public more than thirty thousand times while in office, yet suffered little or no loss of support from Christian churches—including many of our Catholic bishops and parishioners? You could theorize that his supporters are cynical or gullible, but the fact remains that a serial liar was our president for four years and millions of Americans were prepared to vote for him again as though it didn't matter.

Such gross mendacity in American public life ought to be cause for alarm. Our bishops and pastors should be losing sleep worrying that their flocks are falling prey to those who would exploit their credulity. And what of the people who have accepted the view that it is fine to defame others if it serves "the cause"? It should bother us that conspiracy theories circulate with such reckless abandon and lives are being jeopardized by disinformation—whether about election fraud, climate change, face masks, or the COVID-19 vaccines. People can die because of lies.

Rarely have we seen the consequences of lying so vividly displayed in a single day as we did during the violent January 6 assault on the Capitol. Precisely because those who attended the rally-turned-insurrection believed the "Big Lie" that Trump's "landslide" victory was being viciously stolen, they stormed the seat of American democracy, terrorized elected officials and their staffs, killed a police officer, injured many others, and vandalized public property.

The Church needs to do something about this. A line from one of our Eucharistic Prayers speaks to me in this regard: "May your Church stand as a living witness to truth and freedom, to peace and justice." Is the Church really "a living witness to truth" in America? And if not, how can we make it so?

RITA FERRONE *is the author of several books about liturgy, including* Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium *(Paulist Press). She is a contributing writer to* Commonweal.

JONATHAN MALESIC

Experiments in Self-Reliance

What Thoreau has to teach Texas

Soon after the power went out one morning in mid-February, and the temperature inside my Dallas home dropped below 50 degrees, I started thinking about Henry David Thoreau.

In *Walden*, the neck-bearded author's account of his "experiment" living in a cabin in the woods, Thoreau writes that "the grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us." Everything else we do, whether observing wildlife, sounding the depths of a pond, or taking another Zoom call, depends on bodily warmth. And I was freezing. The things I relied upon to maintain my vital heat, from the electric grid to my uninsulated house, were failing.

The massive power and water outages in my state stemmed from a breakdown of reliability. It's tempting to respond by striving for greater self-sufficiency, just as Thoreau sought to survive "by the labor of my hands only." Laudable as his attempt was, he couldn't really do it. And neither can Texans—or Texas. Thoreau's life is a lesson not in self-reliance, but in discerning whom and what to rely on, whether you're one person or a state of 29 million.

Thoreau may seem like an unlikely guide to living in Texas. He vehemently opposed the Mexican-American War (1846–48) that kept the fledgling Lone Star State in the union. He was a radical abolitionist at a time when nearly a third of the population of Texas was enslaved. And he complained in *Walden* that the country was "in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

Despite this, Thoreau's spirit of independence actually does reflect Texans' self-mythology. Texans are proud of their state's brief history as an independent republic. Talk of secession still comes up in our lunatic politics. And as we now know all too well, Texas has its own electrical grid, barely connected to the rest of the continent.

The Texan vision of self-reliance too often turns cruel. Texans mocked the country's dependence on their petroleum during the mid-1970s push for a national 55 mph speed limit by applying bumper stickers to their cars that read, "Drive 80, Freeze a Yankee." (So maybe Thoreau was right about the telegraphs.) During the February outages, the now-former mayor of a small city in West Texas posted on Facebook that families without power needed to "sink or swim." He wrote, "It's your choice! The City and County, along with power providers or any other service owes you NOTHING."

Of course, the power companies and grid managers really *do* owe us something. We rely on them, and because they weren't ready for temperatures near zero degrees Fahrenheit, they defaulted. Reliant, the company from which I purchase my electricity on the deregulated energy market, was not true to its name. Neither was the Electric Reliability Commission of Texas, which controls the state's power grid. I didn't even know ERCOT existed until February. Its failure underscores our total dependence on a fragile energy infrastructure we barely notice in ordinary times.

Thoreau criticized early industrial society for making us ever more dependent on technology and exploitative trade. Americans in the mid-nineteenth century, he claimed, "have become the tools of their tools." What's worse, they relied on subjugated laborers: the poor, immigrants, and slaves. None of them had a fair chance to realize their human potential. "Life's finer fruits cannot be plucked by them," Thoreau wrote. "Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that." If each of us relied on ourselves more, he argued, we would need other people to labor less, and all of us would enjoy greater freedom.

Critics like to point out that Thoreau wasn't as independent in the woods as he makes himself out to be in *Walden*. He built his cabin on Emerson's land. He frequently went into Concord and ate at his family home. His mother and sisters did his laundry. He complained about the post office, but used it to correspond with many close friends.

A meal by candlelight in Hutto, Texas, during the February power outage

CNS PHOTO/RICARDO B. BRAZZIELL, AMERICAN-STATESMAN, USA TODAY NETWORK VIA REUTERS

None of this negates *Walden*'s social critique. Rather, it shows how we don't really have to cut our ties to other people to resist the forces of dehumanization. We have to *manage* our reliance on others, not end it. Thoreau was suggesting that you break your addiction to coffee and tobacco to help end slavery, but still visit your mother. Economize so you don't have to sell your labor, but spend your time wildly with those you love.

I was able to warm up because my wife and I were taken in by good friends who, by some inscrutable stroke of fortune, never lost power. We spent two nights at their house, eating, drinking, and playing games to keep our minds off our possibly frozen plumbing. With COVID-19 still rampant, it was risky to stay under one roof with people from a different household. But we trusted that these friends had been careful in avoiding the pandemic, and they trusted us. We knew they were reliable.

Thoreau thought the mark of a philosopher was the ability to "maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men." He was right about the value of practical wisdom. But it's wrong to think wisdom consists of cutting oneself off from others in a fantasy of independence. There are more ways to be a philosopher than sitting atop a lonely mountain.

A philosopher ought to know when to rely on public entities, on strangers, on friends, on oneself. A philosopher can judge who is reliable and who is not and can strengthen indispensable relationships. Friends will let you down from time to time, and even the most stalwart do not normally have the ability to generate electricity. We need power companies, which means we ought to insist they become more reliable even as we work not to lean on them so heavily. Texas needs the other forty-nine states, even as it needs to get better at maintaining its own infrastructure and educating and protecting its residents.

"Some of my friends spoke as if I was coming to the woods on purpose to freeze myself," Thoreau writes in *Walden*. Many nevertheless paid him a visit, with one staying with him in the tiny cabin for two weeks. Thoreau could build a fire on his own, but even he knew that a real housewarming required guests.

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JO MCGOWAN

Why the Farmers Are Angry

Letter from India

More than thirty years ago, I boarded a night train to Delhi with my young children. They were fast asleep in our reserved berths when the train stopped in Haridwar, India's holiest city. I glanced out the window, expecting the usual crowds of pilgrims and *sadhus*, but saw instead what looked like a sea of farmers—tall, lean men in white *khadi kurtas* and green scarves. They surged en masse onto the train, first filling the unreserved compartments and then pouring into the reserved ones. Ignoring the ticket collector's feeble attempts to stop them, they forced their way in, shouting slogans like "*Kisan ki jai*!" ("Victory to the farmer!"). They were on their way to Delhi for an enormous farmers' rally the next day, and nothing was going to stop them.

The children and I were now huddled on one of our three berths as more and more men fought their way into the train car and simply parked themselves on our bunk. Let's just say it was a very long night. For months afterward, whenever the subject of trains came up, my little daughter Moy Moy's eyes would widen as she said emphatically: "Moy train no go. Kisans."

The idea of a child being terrified by *farmers* seems crazy—and it was. Once this mob of men had found seats (most were on the floor) and settled in for the night they were quiet, even courteous. And they were eloquent about the reason for their journey. "If you destroy a bird's nest," one of them said, "will it not cry out?" They insisted on sharing their food with us and when we pulled into Delhi, they helped with our luggage and found us a taxi. Moy Moy had no reason to be afraid of them.

The Indian government, on the other hand, has good reason to fear farmers. While farming makes up only 15 percent of India's GDP, 50 percent of the population works in agriculture. Farmers are a massive voting bloc, incredibly creative and well organized, and they enjoy huge popular support. With half the country working the land, everyone here knows farmers personally.

Yet in September, during the height of the pandemic, with most of the country in lockdown, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party pushed through three farming bills without consulting farmers or their unions. The bills were designed to deregulate the farming sector and open it up to major conglomerates. Protests erupted soon after the bills were enacted and have continued ever since. In Novem-

RANDEEP MADDOKE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Farmers protest India's new farm bills, December 11, 2020.

ber, an estimated 250 million farmers and their supporters took to the streets across the country; even now, several months later, thousands continue to camp out in Delhi demanding that the laws be repealed. On January 26, India's Republic Day, violence broke out in a few parts of Delhi. The groups that organized the protests—which had been completely peaceful until then—claim the violence was instigated by outside agitators, but the government used the incident to impose draconian measures, cutting off electricity, water, and internet to the protest sites and arresting more than 120 people on charges of rioting and sedition.

Why are the farmers so angry? Soon after India won independence in 1947, droughts and floods caused repeated crop failures and famines. In a move to modernize farming, the government undertook the highly publicized Green Revolution with American support. The introduction of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, and heavy machinery seemed like a boon initially, but it ultimately left large tracts of land infertile. Some crops were nearly wiped out entirely, especially the less profitable ones traditionally grown in drought-prone areas. But with massive government support, rice and wheat did remarkably well, resulting in a food surplus.

At this point, the government stepped in to establish a fair pricing system for certain crops. Under this system, which mainly benefits medium-to-large-scale farmers, produce is brought to wholesale local markets known as *mandis*, where it is sold in an open auction. For rice and wheat, a minimum support price (MSP) is set, and the government's Food Corporation of India ends up buying most of these crops and distributing them at very low prices in ration shops throughout the country. Many state governments also provide free electricity and water for farmland.

While the *mandi* system isn't perfect, farmers are convinced that it is the only thing standing between them and financial ruin. It is this system that the new farming laws would abolish. Under the new dispensation, electricity and water will no longer be provided for free and strict land-ceiling acts have been repealed, allowing corporations to snap up enormous tracts.

The first of the three new laws allows unregulated trade outside the *mandi* system. That's already happening, of course, but the control prices at the *mandis* act as a benchmark for the open market. With the MSP no longer guaranteed, small and mid-size buyers fear they will be squeezed out of business, unable to compete with big corporations.

The second law removes current constraints on contract farming. Large companies may now enter into trade agreements directly with farmers, and the government will provide no oversight. That may sound harmless until you consider the power of a company like PepsiCo, which recently sent an army of contract lawyers to square off against eleven farmers in Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state. PepsiCo claimed they were illegally growing its patented FC5 variety of potato. PepsiCo lost that fight, but the battle lines have been drawn. Indian farmers know that unless the law is repealed, they don't stand a chance against the power of multinational corporations. It's only a matter of time before the farmers become mere laborers on land they once proudly owned, and are told which seeds to plant and which crops to grow.

The third law eliminates the storage limits once set by the government to control prices. With no such limits, large companies that have both the space and the money to hold massive amounts of grain will be able to control the prices. At the same time, the government has limited the amount of produce that farmers can hold back.

Overall, these three laws invite large players into a fragmented and deregulated market, leaving farmers to fend for themselves against predatory agribusiness.

POETRY

I CONFESS

Stephen Rybicki

Everything I wrote was imaginary
Things never happened that way
If you ask her

She didn't come along for the ride
As I said many times

So, she's told me to leave her out
and specifically
Not to mention her name

anywhere—
not Even in the credits—

(to be clear)

I alone landed on the MOON
And only pictured her
Looking up from earth

reflected in the visor of my suit

Never really there—
I made the entire story up

But everyone liked the poem.

thought it was inspired. Maybe genius

And admitted to the possibility
at least of the two of us in love.

STEPHEN RYBICKI *is a poet and academic librarian on the faculty of Macomb Community College, and the author of the reference work,* Abbreviations: A Reverse Guide to Standard and Generally Accepted Abbreviated Forms. *He lives in Romeo, Michigan.*

Since agriculture began to be liberalized in India, at least 300,000 farmers have committed suicide.

The question is why the government would do this. According to its press releases and publicity statements, the three new laws will eliminate the middlemen (often depicted as wicked and usurious in Indian films), give farmers access to foreign markets with higher prices, and improve an antiquated sector of the economy. But a deeper look reveals a complex political story in which the current government is placing its bets on a more reliable source of both money and power.

As agriculture's contribution to India's GDP has plummeted—from nearly 60 percent in the 1960s to 15 percent today—the government's focus has shifted from rural India to the cities. Now with over 50 percent of GDP coming from service industries, India is intent on meeting the growing demands of its urban elite. When I moved to India in 1981, there were two brands of toothpaste, two brands of shampoo, and two kinds of chocolate. There was one television station. We were on a waiting list for more than four years to get cooking gas, for *ten* years to get a phone.

In the early '90s, everything changed. With pressure from the World Trade Organization to open up to foreign markets, the era of economic liberalization commenced. McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Nike, and Reebok set up shop. Malls were built. Cellular technology made those long-awaited landlines obsolete. For India's fast-growing middle class, it has been a welcome development. Most educated people believe India has improved dramatically in the past thirty years and that they have an appreciably higher quality of life.

India's economy is one of the fastest growing in the world, but, according to a recent Oxfam report, it is also one of the most unequal: 73 percent of the wealth generated here in 2017 went to the richest 1 percent. COVID-19 has made these disparities even more glaring. In an update to the Oxfam report, new numbers reveal that an unskilled farmer in India would have to work for ten thousand years before he made as much as the Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani made in *one hour* during the pandemic.

The liberalization of India's economy has not been limited to fancy shoes, fast food, and cell phones. Along with goods and services, the government has also encouraged corporate forays into communications, education, and, crucially, health care. Meanwhile, once-robust public systems have deteriorated precipitously. Only the poorest use them now. Though some good doctors and teachers remain, they are helpless in the face of critical supply shortages, broken equipment, lack of trained staff, and appalling conditions.

Private companies were allowed into health care and education as a corrective for poor management and rampant corruption—the same rationale the government now uses for the new agriculture laws. Corporate-run hospitals and schools are now the rule for middle- and upper-class India. The heartlessness and greed of India's private health-care providers are shocking. Private hospitals routinely drain every penny of a family's savings and then kick the dying patient out on the street when the money is gone. The experiment has been a disaster.

But we needn't look to health or education to prove the point about farming. Bihar, India's poorest state, scrapped the *mandi* system more than fourteen years ago. The result was a sharp decline in the farmers' already precarious economic position. Rice sells for as little as 900 rupees ($12.42) a quintal (100 kg) in Bihar, while the MSP set by the Indian government is 1,868 rupees. Many farmers have not even been able to recover their costs, let alone make a profit. Many more have abandoned their farms and migrated to Punjab and Haryana, where they work as daily wage laborers.

They are the lucky ones—at least they're still alive. Since agriculture began to be liberalized in India, at least 300,000 farmers have committed suicide. (That's the official figure; most people believe the real number is much higher.) Farmers groups now fear that debt, crop failure, and a mounting sense of hopelessness—especially in the wake of the new laws—will lead to even more suicides.

Public opinion about the farmers' protests has divided along class lines, with the poor being highly enthusiastic and the middle- and upper-classes strongly opposed. The government's unprecedented response to the protests—arresting demonstrators and journalists on sedition charges, shutting down the internet, lashing out at international stars like Rihanna and Greta Thunberg for voicing their support for protesters on Twitter, and even arresting a twenty-one-year-old woman named Disha Ravi for sharing an organizing toolkit—smacks of desperation.

India signed on to the World Trade Organization's free-trade agreement in 2003. The agreement stipulates that all signatories be in accord with WTO rulings by 2020. Some of these rulings require precisely the kind of changes made by the new farm laws: if India wants to remain in the WTO, it has no choice but to comply. The Indian government is trying to keep up with increasingly exigent demands of neoliberal globalization.

In coverage of the 2020 protests, I heard one farmer use the same image of the bird and its nest that I had heard on that train thirty years ago. Farmers have long memories and uncomplicated demands: Let us farm in peace. Don't destroy our nests. Because ultimately you will be destroying your own.

JO MCGOWAN, *a frequent* Commonweal *contributor, writes from Deradoon, India.*

A child walks over drying cocoa beans in the Ivory Coast, West Africa.

TOMMY TRENCHARD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

FERNANDO C. SALDIVAR, SJ

A Wicked Impunity

Will the Supreme Court gut the Alien Tort Statute?

On December 1, 2020, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the consolidated cases of *Nestlé USA, Inc. v. Doe I* and *Cargill, Inc. v. Doe I*. Depending on how the court rules, these cases could mark the end of the Alien Tort Statute (ATS) as a means of holding corporations accountable in U.S. federal courts for human-rights abuses committed abroad. For victims of such abuses, particularly those in Africa, ATS has, until now, provided an opportunity to seek relief in the only jurisdiction where they can obtain an enforceable judgment, and where such a judgment is most likely to influence the future behavior of the offending corporations and their shareholders. While much of the world's attention was focused last fall on whether the Supreme Court would find a way to meddle in the U.S. presidential election, human-rights lawyers and activists were paying close and anxious attention to the *Nestlé* and *Cargill* cases.

The ATS, which was part of the Judiciary Act of 1789, gives federal courts jurisdiction to hear civil claims brought by foreigners for torts "committed in violation of the law of nations or a treaty of the United States." For most of its history the ATS lay dormant, but forty years ago courts began interpreting it as a way for victims of human-rights abuses that took place abroad to seek redress. Over the past couple of decades, however, the U.S. Supreme Court has made such redress more difficult by progressively narrowing the scope of the statute. At stake in the *Nestlé* and *Cargill* cases is the question of whether U.S. *domestic* corporations can be held liable under the ATS for their conduct in foreign countries and, if so, whether those corpo-

The Supreme Court is on the cusp of effectively granting legal immunity to U.S. corporations for the harm they do in other parts of the world.

rations can be held liable for "aiding and abetting."

These are not mere legal technicalities. Ruling that U.S. corporations cannot be held liable under the ATS would make it much easier for them to act with impunity abroad. Without a way to sue U.S. corporations in U.S. courts, victims of human-rights abuses committed by those corporations in other countries would effectively be left without a remedy. It is notoriously difficult to get American courts to honor judgments from the countries where the abuse took place. This has particular importance for Africa: both the *Nestlé* and *Cargill* cases involve claims of child slavery in cocoa production in the Ivory Coast, and several of the landmark cases that have narrowed the scope of the ATS have involved African plaintiffs suing for conduct in Africa.

According to the International Cocoa Organization (ICCO), West Africa accounts for 73 percent of global cocoa production. Ivory Coast alone produced 45 percent of the world's cocoa in the 2019–2020 crop year. Chances are that the chocolate bar by the checkout counter and the syrup swirling in your café mocha began their journey to you on a West African cocoa plantation.

Wherever it ends, the cocoa supply chain starts with human beings cutting down ripe cocoa pods with machetes, cracking them open, and harvesting the seeds inside. Much of this difficult work is done by children—and often by children who have been trafficked to farms specifically for this purpose. The *Nestlé* and *Cargill* cases involve the claims of six former child slaves who were abducted as children from Mali and sold to an Ivorian farm where they were forced to harvest cocoa. The suits allege that the defendants, who are responsible for importing most of Ivory Coast's cocoa harvest into the United States, aided and abetted child slavery by providing material assistance to these farmers. As the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals succinctly put it, "the gravamen of the complaint is that defendants depended on—and orchestrated—a slave-based supply chain." The two cases were first filed more than fifteen years ago and have been stuck in various stages of appeal since then. Even if the court were to rule in favor of the claimants, their suits would still need to return to trial courts to be heard on the merits.

Over the decade-and-a-half that these cases have been winding their way through the federal courts, the corporate defendants have denied not that children are trafficked on Ivorian cocoa farms, nor that the plaintiffs were actually child slaves, but only that the defendants themselves should be held liable for it. In 2018, the Supreme Court held in *Jesner v. Arab Bank, PLC*, that a foreign corporation could not be held liable under the ATS. Now the defendants in the *Nestlé* and *Cargill* cases are asking the court to expand this to cover domestic corporations too. Moreover, the Trump administration filed an amicus brief asking the court to go even further and rule that a claim of domestic aiding and abetting is precluded under the ATS.

As the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals stated, the crux of the complaint is not that either of these corporations went directly into Mali to kidnap children, but that they aided and abetted child slavery by failing to police their supply chains. The prevalence of child labor in West African cocoa production, as well as the high rate of trafficking from countries such as Mali, is not a secret. The 2001 Harkin-Engel Protocol obliged cocoa manufacturers to meet targets for the reduction of child labor in the industry. Those targets have all been missed. The plaintiffs in the *Nestlé* and *Cargill* claim that the defendants aided and abetted child slavery by supporting farms with the lowest labor costs, even though they knew these farms saved money by using child labor. All of these decisions, the plaintiffs allege, were ratified at corporate headquarters in the United States. The defendants are urging the court not only to reject this theory of their liability but also to prohibit all ATS claims against U.S. corporations for any conduct that takes place abroad, even if it involves slavery.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis writes that "we are still far from a globalization of the most basic human rights." This is evident in the unwillingness of the United States and European countries to hold corporations responsible for their conduct abroad. On November 29, Swiss voters rejected the Responsible Business Initiative, which would have made Swiss businesses liable for human-rights or environmental violations committed abroad. Now the Supreme Court is on the cusp of effectively granting legal immunity to U.S. corporations for the harm they do in other parts of the world. This is legally dubious and morally unacceptable. Corporations that profit from slavery and other gross injustices must not be permitted to hide behind unreasonably narrow rules of jurisdiction. Global markets without global accountability is a recipe for abuse.

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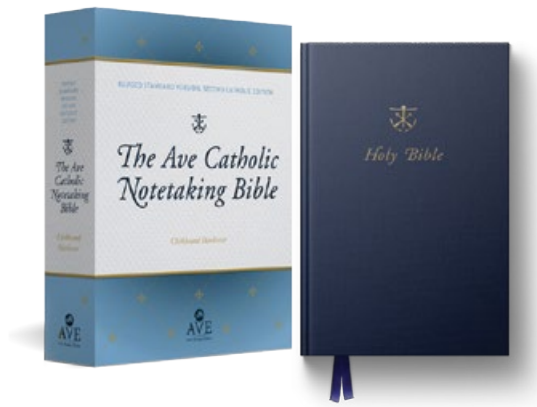

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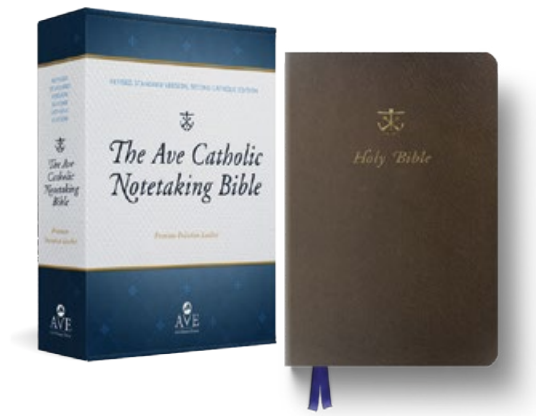

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Last Men and Women

George Scialabba

Nietzsche was wrong about liberal democracy. Was he right about the kind of people it might produce?

We all know Nietzsche's parable of the last man. Certain that democracy, science, and secular humanism would definitively reshape civilization, Nietzsche—or more precisely, Zarathustra—asks what kind of human being would result. His answer, dripping with sarcasm and contempt, is that ordinary humans would become a kind of insect, "a race as ineradicable as the flea-beetle," a creature that would "make the earth itself small." Here is Zarathustra's lament:

> Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the *last man*.
>
> "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?" the last man asks, and he blinks....
>
> "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth...
>
> No shepherd and one herd! Everyone wants the same, everyone is the same; whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse...
>
> One has one's little pleasures for the day and one's little pleasures for the night, but one has a regard for health.
>
> "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink.

Plenty of others besides Nietzsche have expressed misgivings about the likely character of democratic citizens, and these critics have not all been opponents of democracy. (I'm using "democracy" here to mean the whole Enlightenment program: not just political equality but also feminism, pacifism, human rights, and the welfare state, along with a chastened belief in, and modest hopes for, moral and material progress.) Tocqueville's reservations are well known: "The general character of past society was diversity," he wrote. "Unity and uniformity were nowhere to be met with. In modern society, however, all things threaten to become so much alike that the peculiar characteristics of each individual will be entirely lost in the uniformity of the general aspect." Even John Stuart Mill fretted that "the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind.... At present individuals are lost in the crowd." Criticisms of mass society and mass man swelled to a roar in the twentieth century: Durkheim, Spengler, Schmitt, Ortega, Lippmann, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, MacIntyre, Bloom, and many, many others.

Most of these criticisms I reject, not for their often-powerful diagnoses but for the illiberal prescriptions that usually accompany them. I agree with Richard Rorty's admirably forthright solution to the supposed dilemma of democratic mediocrity: to wit, "even if the typical character types of liberal democracies *are* bland, calculating, petty, and unheroic, the prevalence of such people may be a reasonable price to pay for political freedom." We can and should separate the private from the public, self-creation from tolerance, the pursuit of perfection from democratic politics. As Rorty famously elaborated:

> From Plato through Kant down to [Habermas and Derrida], most philosophers have tried to fuse sublimity and decency, to fuse social hope with knowledge of something big.... My own hunch is that we have to separate individual and social reassurance, to make sublimity [unlike tolerance] a private, optional matter. That means conceding to Nietzsche that democratic societies have no higher aim than what he called "the last men"—the people who have "their little pleasures for the day and their little pleasures for the night." Maybe we should just make that concession, and also concede that democratic societies do not embody anything, and cannot be reassured by anything, larger than themselves (e.g., by "rationality"). Such societies should not aim at the creation of a new breed of human being, or at anything less banal than evening out people's chances of getting a little pleasure out of their lives. This means that citizens of those societies who have a taste for sublimity will have to pursue it on their own time, and within the limits set by *On Liberty*. But such opportunities might be quite enough.

That, broadly, is where I also stand—with the Enlightenment and its contemporary heirs, and against Straussians, religious conservatives, national-greatness neoconservatives, Ayn Randian libertarians, and anyone else for whom tolerance, civic equality, international law, and a universal minimum standard of material welfare are less than fundamental commitments. But without, I hope, contradicting myself, I'd like to work the other side of the street for a while: to acknowledge the force of at least some criticisms of modernity and progress.

Perhaps the most important, though also the most fragile, success Enlightenment liberalism has had is the delegitimation, however partial, of war. The perception that the arbitrary power of absolute rulers facilitated needless and vastly destructive wars was a powerful impetus to popular sovereignty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in the United Nations Charter. Though the charter has been repeatedly violated by the great powers (and not only by them), it is not quite a dead letter, and a global culture of respect for international law may be the most urgent cause any activist could devote her life to.

Even so, biology has its rights. In 1910, the last year of his life and only a few years before World War I put an end to the long European peace, William James wrote a pamphlet for the Association for International Conciliation, one of the many pacifist groups whose prominence in that period convinced many people that war between nations, being so obviously irrational, was therefore impossible. James's essay, titled "The Moral Equivalent of War," is a work of supreme pathos and wisdom. James himself was a pacifist, a founding member of the Anti-Imperialist League, a group formed to

GREMLIN/GETTY

protest America's military interventions in Cuba, Haiti, and the Philippines, and one of the most humane and generous spirits America or any other nation has ever produced.

James understood perfectly the folly—the "monstrosity," as he called it—of war, even in those comparatively innocent, pre-nuclear days. But he also acknowledged the place of the martial virtues in a healthy character. "We inherit the warlike type," he pointed out, "and for most of the capacities of heroism that the human race is full of we have to thank [our bloody] history." "The martial virtues," he continued, "although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods.... Militarism is the supreme theater of strenuousness, the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood; and human life with no use for strenuousness and hardihood would be contemptible." "We pacifists," he wrote with characteristic intellectual generosity, "ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetic and ethical point of view of our opponents." To militarists, a world without war is "a sheep's paradise," flat and insipid. "No scorn, no hardness, no valor any more!" he imagines them saying indignantly. "Fie upon such a cattleyard of a planet!" This, remember, was the era of Teddy Roosevelt, preacher of the strenuous life and instigator of splendid little wars. James's pacifism may be common sense to you and me, but when he wrote, the common sense of Americans was mostly on Roosevelt's side.

How to nourish the martial virtues without war? James resolved this apparent dilemma with a suggestion many decades ahead of its time: universal national service, every youth to be conscripted for several years of hard and socially necessary physical work, with no exceptions and no class or educational discrimination. This army without weapons would be the moral equivalent of war, breeding, James argued, some of the virtues essential to democracy: "intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command." I am sure James would have agreed that these are not the only virtues essential to democracy—he himself, with his anti-imperialist activism, exemplified an equally essential skepticism and resistance to authority. But I wonder if our contemporaries, who mostly need no convincing about the necessity of skepticism and resistance to authority, would also agree with James about the importance of valor, strenuousness, and self-sacrifice.

James wrote in America before World War I, a situation of almost idyllic innocence compared with that of the next writer I want to cite, D. H. Lawrence. The Great War, as contemporaries called it, was a soul-shattering experience for English writers. The complacent stupidity with which Europe's governing classes initiated, conducted, and concluded that war, the chauvinism and bloodlust with which ordinary people welcomed it, and above all, the mindless, mechanical grinding up of millions of lives by a war machine that seemed to go of itself—these things infuriated Lawrence almost to madness. Like many others, Lawrence saw the facelessness, the impersonality, the almost bureaucratic character of this mass violence as something new and horrifying in human history. But more than all others in the twentieth century, Lawrence was the champion of the body and the instincts against the abstract, impersonal forces of modernity. Like Nietzsche, he marshaled torrents of impassioned prose against the apparently inexorable encroachments of progress. Here is a passage from "Education of the People," published posthumously in the two volumes of *Phoenix*.

> We are all fighters. Let us fight. Has it come down to chasing a poor fox and kicking a leather ball? Heavens, what a spectacle we should be to the ancient Greek. Rouse the old male spirit again. The male is always a fighter. The human male is a superb and god-like fighter, unless he is contravened in his own nature. In fighting to the death, he has one great crisis of his being.
>
> What is the fight? It is a primary, physical thing. It is not a horrible, obscene, abstract business, like our last war. It is not a ghastly and blasphemous translation of ideas into engines, and men into cannon-fodder. Away with such war. A million times away with such obscenity. Let the desire of it die out of mankind.... Let us beat our plowshares into swords, if we will. But let us blow all guns and explosives and poison-gases sky-high. Let us shoot every man who makes one more grain of gunpowder, with his own powder.
>
> And then let us be soldiers, hand-to-hand soldiers. Lord, but it is a bitter thing to be born at the end of a rotten, idea-ridden machine civilization. Think what we've missed: the glorious bright passion of anger and pride, reckless and dauntless.

In other words: fight when you must, when your blood boils over and your anger won't be gainsaid. But fight face to face, hand to hand, in your own quarrels and in your own skin, as a responsible human being and not a machine, or worse, a machine-operator. I think James would have agreed with that. I'll go further: I think Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, Grace Paley, and maybe even Dorothy Day would have agreed. I believe that one can be—*must* be—both a feminist and an upholder of the martial virtues, just as James showed that one must be both a pacifist and an upholder of the martial virtues.

Modernity imperils another set of virtues, which are a little harder to characterize than the martial virtues, but are even more important. I don't mean the bourgeois virtues, though there's some overlap. I suppose I'd call them the yeoman virtues. I have in mind the qualities we associate with life in the early American republic—the positive qualities, of course, not the qualities that enabled slavery and genocide. In 1820, 80 percent of the American population was self-employed. Protestant Christianity, local self-government, and agrarian and artisanal producerism fostered a culture of self-control, self-reliance, integrity, diligence, and neighborliness—the American ethos that Tocqueville praised and that Lincoln argued was incompatible with large-scale slave-owning. Today that ethos survives only in political speeches and Hollywood movies. In a society based on precarious employment and feverish con-

sumption, on debt, financial trickery, endless manipulation, and incessant distraction, such a sensibility seems archaic.

According to the late Christopher Lasch, the advent of mass production and the new relations of authority it introduced in every sphere of social life wrought a fateful change in the prevailing American character. Psychological maturation—as Lasch, relying on Freud, explicated it—depended crucially on face-to-face relations, on a rhythm and a scale that industrialism disrupted. The result was a weakened, malleable self, more easily regimented than its pre-industrial forebear, less able to withstand conformist pressures and bureaucratic manipulation—the antithesis of the rugged individualism that had undergirded the republican virtues.

In an important recent book, *The Age of Acquiescence*, the historian Steve Fraser deploys a similar argument to explain why, in contrast with the first Gilded Age, when America was wracked by furious anti-capitalist resistance, popular response in our time to the depredations of capitalism has been so feeble. Here is Fraser's thesis:

> During the first Gilded Age the work ethic constituted the nuclear core of American cultural belief and practice. That era's emphasis on capital accumulation presumed frugality, saving, and delayed gratification as well as disciplined, methodical labor. That ethos frowned on self-indulgence, was wary of debt, denounced wealth not transparently connected to useful, tangible outputs, and feared libidinal excess, whether that took the form of gambling, sumptuary displays, leisured indolence, or uninhibited sexuality.
>
> How at odds that all is with the moral and psychic economy of our own second Gilded Age. An economy kept aloft by finance and mass consumption has for a long time rested on an ethos of immediate gratification, enjoyed a love affair with debt, speculation, and risk, erased the distinction between productive labor and pursuits once upon a time judged parasitic, and become endlessly inventive about ways to supercharge with libido even the homeliest of household wares.
>
> Can these two diverging political economies—one resting on industry, the other on finance—and these two polarized sensibilities—one fearing God, the other living in an impromptu moment to moment—explain the Great Noise of the first Gilded Age and the Great Silence of the second? Is it possible that people still attached by custom and belief to ways of subsisting that had originated outside the orbit of capital accumulation were for that very reason both psychologically and politically more existentially desperate, more capable, and more audacious in envisioning a non-capitalist future than those who have come of age knowing nothing else?

If this argument is true—and I find it painfully plausible—where does that leave us? An individual's or a society's character cannot be willed into or out of existence. Lost virtues and solidarities cannot be regained overnight, or even, perhaps, in a generation. Even our ideologies of liberation may have to be rethought. A transvaluation of values may be in order: faster, easier, and more may have to give way to slower, harder, and less—not only for ecological reasons but also for reasons of mental and moral hygiene. And even if we decide, as a society, to spit out the poisoned apple of consumerism and technological addiction, is there a path back—or forward, for that matter? If individual self-sufficiency and local self-government are prerequisites for human flourishing, then maybe it is too late.

An individual's or a society's character cannot be willed into or out of existence. Lost virtues and solidarities cannot be regained overnight, or even, perhaps, in a generation.

I know of only one book that takes the full measure of the dilemmas I've been hinting at and goes on to show one way to a sane and stable future. It's a utopian novel by Ernest Callenbach, called *Ecotopia*. It was published in 1975 and had a brief vogue before disappearing along with the rest of the counterculture of that era. It deserves better: it's politically and psychologically astute, and ecologically far ahead of its—or our—time. But the utopian society it depicts, located in the Pacific Northwest, is made possible by the survival in that region of some of the very cultural traits and virtues whose obsolescence in the rest of the country I've been lamenting.

Do my apparently disparate-sounding worries have anything in common? Possibly this: they all result from one or another move on the part of the culture away from the immediate, the instinctual, the face-to-face. We are embodied beings, gradually adapted over millions of years to thrive on a certain scale, our metabolisms a delicate orchestration of innumerable biological and geophysical rhythms. The culture of modernity has thrust upon us, sometimes with traumatic abruptness, experiences, relationships, and powers for which we may not yet be ready—to which we may need more time to adapt.

But time is short. "All that is solid melts into air"—Marx meant the crust of tradition, dissolving in the acid bath of global capitalism. Now, however, the earth itself is melting. Marx's great metaphor has acquired a terrifying second meaning.

And so has Nietzsche's. If we cannot slow down and grow cautiously, evenly, gradually into our new technological and political possibilities and responsibilities—even the potentially liberating ones—the last recognizably individual men and women may give place, before too many more generations, to the simultaneously sub- and super-human civilization of the hive.

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Minds Without Brains?

John W. Farrell

The promise and peril of artificial intelligence

In the view of many scientists, Artificial Intelligence (AI) isn't living up to the hype of its proponents. We don't yet have safe driverless cars—and we're not likely to in the near future. Nor are robots about to take on all our domestic drudgery so that we can devote more time to leisure. On the brighter side, robots are also not about to take over the world and turn humans into slaves the way they do in the movies.

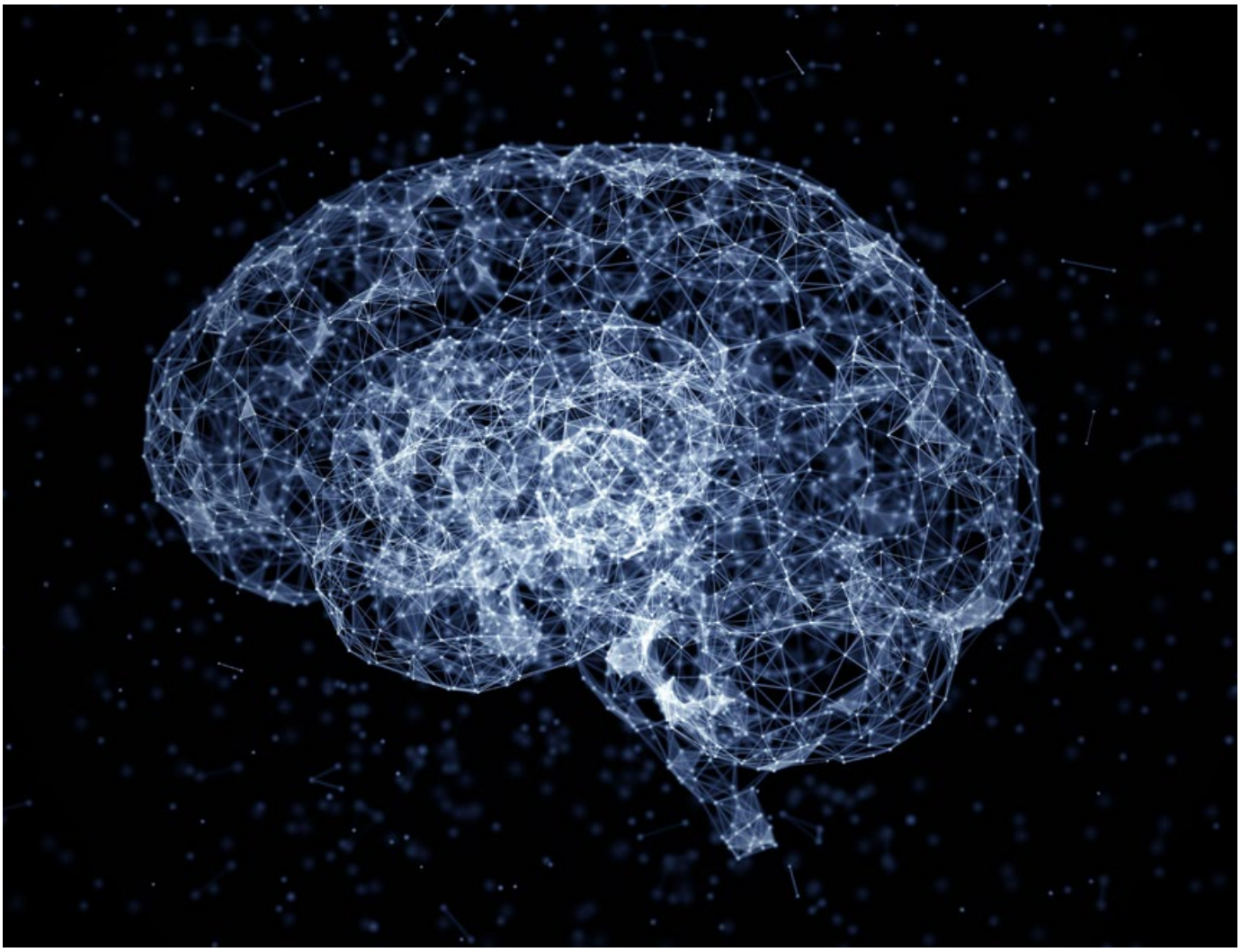
Nevertheless, there is real cause for concern about the impact AI is already having on us. As Gary Marcus and Ernest Davis write in their book, *Rebooting AI: Building Artificial Intelligence We Can Trust*, "the AI we have now simply can't be trusted." In their view, the more authority we prematurely turn over to current machine systems, the more worried we should be. "Some glitches are mild, like an Alexa that randomly giggles (or wakes you in the middle of the night, as happened to one of us), or an iPhone that autocorrects what was meant as 'Happy Birthday, dear Theodore' into 'Happy Birthday, dead Theodore,'" they write. "But others—like algorithms that promote fake news or bias against job applicants—can be serious problems."

Marcus and Davis cite a report by the AI Now Institute detailing AI problems in many different domains, including Medicaid-eligibility determination, jail-term sentencing, and teacher evaluations:

> Flash crashes on Wall Street have caused temporary stock market drops, and there have been frightening privacy invasions (like the time an Alexa recorded a conversation and inadvertently sent it to a random person on the owner's contact list); and multiple automobile crashes, some fatal. We wouldn't be surprised to see a major AI-driven malfunction in an electrical grid. If this occurs in the heat of summer or the dead of winter, a large number of people could die.

The computer scientist Jaron Lanier has cited the darker aspects of AI as it has been exploited by social-media giants like Facebook and Google, where he used to work. In Lanier's view, AI-driven social-media platforms promote factionalism and division among users, as starkly demonstrated in the 2016 and 2020 elections, when Russian hackers created fake social-media accounts to drive American voters toward Donald Trump. As Lanier writes in his book, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, AI-driven social media are designed to commandeer the user's attention and invade her privacy, to overwhelm her with content that has not been fact-checked or vetted. In fact, Lanier concludes, it is designed to "turn people into assholes."

As Brooklyn College professor of law and *Commonweal* contributor Frank Pasquale points out in his book, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms*



JEZPER/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

That Control Money and Information, the loss of individual privacy is also alarming. (See Lawrence Joseph's interview with Pasquale, "What Robots Can't Do," in *Commonweal*'s December 2020 issue.) And while powerful businesses, financial institutions, and government agencies hide their actions behind nondisclosure agreements, "proprietary methods," and gag rules, the lives of ordinary consumers are increasingly open books to them. "Everything we do online is recorded," Pasquale writes:

> The only questions left are to whom the data will be available, and for how long. Anonymizing software may shield us for a little while, but who knows whether trying to hide isn't itself the ultimate red flag for watchful authorities? Surveillance cameras, data brokers, sensor networks, and "supercookies" record how fast we drive, what pills we take, what books we read, what websites we visit. The law, so aggressively protective of secrecy in the world of commerce, is increasingly silent when it comes to the privacy of persons.

Meanwhile, as Lanier notes, these big tech companies are publicly committed to an extravagant AI "race" that they often prioritize above all else. Lanier thinks this race is insane. "We forget that AI is a story we computer scientists made up to help us get funding once upon a time, back when we depended on grants from government agencies. It was pragmatic theater. But now AI has become a fiction that has overtaken its authors."

In Marcus and Davis's view, the entire field needs to refocus its energy on making AI more responsive to common sense. And to do this will require a complete rethinking of how we program machines.

> "The ability to conceive of one's own intent and then use it as a piece of evidence in causal reasoning is a level of self-awareness (if not consciousness) that no machine I know of has achieved," writes

Some think that AI has become a fiction that has overtaken its authors.

The AI industry often obscures the basic distinction between how computers work and how brains work by offering "cute AI": robots that look like cats or dogs, or like us.

Judea Pearl, a leading AI proponent who has spent his entire career researching machine intelligence. "I would like to be able to lead a machine into temptation and have it say, 'No.'" In Pearl's view, current computers don't really constitute artificial intelligence. They simply constitute the ground level of what can and likely will lead to true artificial intelligence. Having an app that makes your life much easier is not the same thing as having a conversation with a machine that can reason and respond to you like another human being.

In his *Book of Why: The New Science of Cause and Effect*, co-written with Dana McKenzie, Pearl lays out the challenges that need to be met in order to produce machines that can think for themselves. Current AI systems can scan for regularities and patterns in swaths of data faster than any human. They can be taught to beat champion chess and Go players. According to an article in *Science*, there is now a computer that can even beat humans at multiplayer games of poker. But these are all narrowly defined tasks; they do not require what Pearl means by thinking for oneself. In his view, machines that use data have yet to learn how to "play" with it. To think for themselves, they would need to be able to determine how to make use of data to answer causal questions. Even more crucially, they would need to learn how to ask counterfactual questions about how the same data could be used differently. In short, they would have to learn to ask a question that comes naturally to every three-year-old child: "Why?"

"To me, a strong AI should be a machine that can reflect on its actions and learn from past mistakes. It should be able to understand the statement 'I should have acted differently,' whether it is told as much by a human or arrives at that conclusion itself." Pearl builds his approach around what he calls a three-level "Ladder of Causation," at the pinnacle of which stand humans, the only species able to think in truly causal terms, to posit counterfactuals ("What would have happened if…?").

But then a further question arises: Would such artificial intelligence be conscious the way we are? Or would it simply be a more advanced form of "smart" machine that exists purely to serve humans? There is reason for skepticism. As philosopher David Chalmers told Prashanth Ramakrishna in a *New York Times* interview in 2019, intelligence does not necessarily imply subjective consciousness:

> Intelligence is a matter of the behavioral capacities of these systems: what they can do, what outputs they can produce given their inputs. When it comes to intelligence, the central question is, given some problems and goals, can you come up with the right means to your ends? If you can, that is the hallmark of intelligence. Consciousness is more a matter of subjective experience. You and I have intelligence, but we also have subjectivity; it feels like something on the inside when we have experiences. That subjectivity—consciousness—is what makes our lives meaningful. It's also what gives us moral standing as human beings.

In Chalmers's view, trying to prove that machines have achieved consciousness would not be easy. "Maybe an A.I. system that could describe its own conscious states to me, saying, 'I'm feeling pain right now. I'm having this experience of hurt or happiness or sadness' would count for more. Maybe what would count for the most is [its] feeling some puzzlement at its mental state: 'I know objectively that I'm just a collection of silicon circuits, but from the inside I feel like so much more.'"

For his part, Pearl doesn't address this philosophical question of consciousness directly. He seems to assume that if AI were strong enough in its causal thinking, there's no reason to believe it wouldn't also be conscious in Chalmers's sense. Many philosophers and theologians, as well as many other AI scientists, would disagree. Consciousness won't happen spontaneously or as emergent behavior, the computer scientist Ernest Davis told me in an email:

> It might be possible for humans to develop systems that would tend in that direction. That, I should say, would be unwise, not so much because of the remote possibility that they would be malevolent and powerful, but just because they would be hard to predict…. The scenario in the movie *Ex Machina*, where the malevolent robot murders her creator in order to escape her confinement, is extremely unlikely unless you deliberately set out to do that. (It's also far beyond current technology.)

What would be much more likely, in Davis's view, is an AI whose behavior seems intermittently very strange and pointless and therefore occasionally randomly destructive. Currently AI programs serve as a tool, and a good tool is one in which you can be confident.

What's tantalizing about Pearl's work is the possibility that the causal thinking he has marked out as the path toward achieving strong AI might bring with it a haunting suggestion of how our own human consciousness evolved. For Pearl, who was raised an observant Jew in Israel, somewhere in human evolution humans realized the world is made up not only of facts (data), but also of a network of cause-effect relationships. In fact, these causal explanations, not facts, make up the bulk

of human knowledge. Finally, in Pearl's view, the transition from animal processors of raw data to the composers of explanations was not gradual. It was a leap that required a push.

For Pearl, the story of Adam and Eve and their punishment in the Book of Genesis represents the emergence of our unique ability to think causally. "We knew, however, that the author who choreographed the story of Genesis struggled to answer the most pressing philosophical questions of his time. We likewise suspected that this story bore the cultural footprints of the actual process by which *Homo sapiens* gained dominion over our planet. What, then, was the sequence of steps in this speedy, super-evolutionary process?" Pearl believes it was a rapid ascent through the Ladder of Causation: from observation, to intervention, to causal thinking.

Scripture might have something to tell us about the top rung of Pearl's Ladder: the need and the ability to posit counterfactuals. The tragic aspect of the story of Adam and Eve, as interpreted in the Christian doctrine of the Fall and original sin, is the great counterfactual: How much better off would we be if Adam and Eve had *not* sinned? What would the world without the Fall be like? It's a question that preoccupied more than a few of the Church Fathers and later theologians, including Thomas Aquinas. We know animals feel sadness and loss over the death of family members. We know they experience denial. (We have observed a female chimp carrying the corpse of her baby around on her back for days after its death, and an orca whale doing the same thing for her dead calf). But we have no evidence they brood over how things might have been different. Only humans have the self-awareness to ask themselves, "How might grief have been avoided if we had gone down that path instead of this one?" Pearl thinks we will one day be able to build machines with the kind of self-awareness that makes them, too, capable of second thoughts and regret—though he doesn't think it will be soon.

But not everyone is so certain that a strong AI, capable of reason, would be conscious in the way we consider ourselves to be. Like David Chalmers, the AI specialist Susan Schneider, author of *Artificial You*, draws a distinction between intelligent behavior and the kind of consciousness brains produce. Schneider has a PhD in philosophy from Rutgers and was a fellow at Princeton's Center for Theological Inquiry. She now runs the Center for the Future of the Mind at Florida Atlantic University, where she and her colleagues are building a robot lab. "I think we need to distinguish between consciousness and intelligence. We could in principle create highly intelligent machines that are not conscious," she told me by phone. "Think about the human brain. Much of the brain's activity is unconscious computation. We know sophisticated mental processing can happen without consciousness. And we can also see from the developments in AI that there's impressive development in machine learning—moving toward a more general form of intelligence. And these algorithms are not exactly like what the brain is doing." Schneider mentions the computer Go champion as an example. "That algorithm does not process the game the way we would. So I would not assume at all that machines would be conscious. We need to be sensitive to that distinction."

Until now, Schneider says, we haven't needed to be so mindful of the distinction between intelligence and consciousness "because in the biological arena, where you see intelligence, you see consciousness." But with the rise of AI, the distinction must be maintained clearly: the fact that a computer can behave intelligently does not demonstrate that it is capable of subjective experience. The AI industry often obscures the basic distinction between how computers work and how brains work by offering "cute AI": robots that look like cats or dogs, or like us. When a robot has what looks like a face—when it can appear to smile and look us in the eyes—it becomes much easier for us to imagine that it has experiences like our own. But that is a projection, not a reasonable inference from the robot's actual behavior. Schneider told me she has adopted a wait-and-see position when it comes to the question of whether machines can ever attain actual consciousness.

The British writer Susan Blackmore has no doubt that they can; in fact, she believes that they already have, at least to some degree. Blackmore began her career in psychology and the study of consciousness by researching and trying to understand the cause of her own out-of-body experience (OBE) as a young woman. She wrote about this at length in her recent book, *Seeing Myself: What Out-of-Body Experiences Tell Us About Life, Death and the Mind*. Her years of reviewing the experiences of others who reported OBEs, as well as scientific surveys of the phenomena, led her to conclude that none constitute reliable evidence of the mind's survival after death. She has come to believe that consciousness as we have traditionally thought about it is an illusion. This means not

that consciousness isn't real, but that it is not an immaterial substance or essence with an independent existence. The existence of consciousness does not entail the existence of an immaterial soul. And if this is the case, Blackmore argues, then there is no reason to believe machines cannot also become conscious.

"I think there is no reason *not* to expect strong AI," Blackmore told me when we spoke via Skype. But her idea of strong AI and how it might develop is very different from Pearl's. In Blackmore's view, there is too much credence given to the notion that AI is an entirely human production. "Most people seem to concentrate on this idea of 'We make artificial intelligence and we put it into some kind of machine.' Well, maybe. Maybe not. What really interests me is the artificial intelligence that is already evolving of its own accord, for its own sake."

Blackmore is a proponent of "meme theory"—the idea that human concepts, behaviors, cultural artifacts, and religious rituals survive and propagate and evolve among human societies over time in much the same way that genes do within Darwinian evolution. Like genes, they succeed by the simple process of replication, variation, and selection. According to Blackmore, we can see that machines are now engaged in their own worldwide sharing of their own kind of memes. Indeed, she sees AI memes—or "tremes" as she calls them—as the third replicator in the history of life: genes came first with biological evolution, followed by memes with the explosion of human culture, and now with AI the third great replicator has emerged.

"This would include internet memes," she said, "and it would include all the information that is being processed without our knowledge. I mean, internet memes are a kind of intermediate example because we do the choosing and we do the varying." But with the "tremes," most of the replicating is being done by the machines themselves. "You need three processes: copying, varying, and selecting. That's basic Darwinism. So the question to my mind is: How much of those three things *are already being* done without human intervention?" The copying is fairly obvious: "Stuff is copied all around all over the cloud in no time—copies of this chat will be for a while. And our emails, multiple copies." Then there is the variation. Blackmore claims that this is now being done by machines with little supervision or monitoring by human beings. "Things like automated student essays—things like artificial journalism. Loads and loads of these programs have been developed, algorithms for producing newspaper articles that are often indistinguishable from ones written by a human person." Finally you have selection. And this, too, is being done by machines (think of Google). "Search engines select what they're going to give to any particular person in response to their query."

Blackmore argues that if all that is happening right now, "it's really the same kind of thing happening that produced our intelligence. It is a whole lot of different algorithms or different processes if you want to be more general, all interacting with each other, feeding off each other, by the nature of being an evolutionary process, getting more and more complex and more and more interconnected. That to my mind is how artificial intelligence is appearing."

At some point she thinks this will evolve into strong AI—without our help—and, once it does, she thinks machine consciousness could rival human consciousness. "It's deeply mysterious in many ways, although becoming less so, I would say. But there seems no question to me but it's come about by evolution producing the kind of brain and the kind of body that we have and in the kind of social exchanges that we have. You've got to have brain, body, and other people as well, to get our kind of consciousness. Machines are doing that, too. And they are evolving. It's another layer of evolution." Blackmore's position suggests that there is no impermeable boundary between biology and technology: both are subject to the same fundamental laws of nature.

Mark Vernon, author of *A Secret History of Christianity*, and a trained psychologist as well as an Anglican theologian, is not convinced that AI can achieve consciousness in any meaningful sense. As he told me via email:

> Perhaps a good question to ask is what is it to be alive? The classical answer, from Aristotle through Aquinas, is to say: it is to have a principle of movement from within, where movement means any kind of activity. So a plant has one internal principle of movement, which Aristotle called the plant soul; animals have another, because there's also an element of voluntariness in their movement, the animal soul; and humans have another again—along with arguably some other animals—because we can add reason, self-awareness, and so on to our principle of movement, which gathered together can be called the human soul as the principle of movement within the body.

Vernon does not believe that artificial intelligence can be self-moving. "Self-moving in the sense that organisms have it is something that a

whole organism does and this implies that the whole organism comes before the parts and 'programs' that make up the organism," he said. "It's why you can't make a living organism out of parts (though you might be able to replace certain parts of living organisms). An organism's parts always exist in virtue of being part of the whole, not by having an autonomous character of their own."

Human consciousness depends on a body that developed through evolution. If we want to create AI that is conscious in the same way we are, should we be building it in something like the way that evolution built us? Schneider told me her new lab at the Center for the Future Mind is actually working on this approach as one of its long-term projects. Christof Koch, a chief neuroscientist at the Allen Institute for Brain Science in Seattle, also appreciates this Aristotelian approach to embodiment. His confidence that AI systems can and will indeed become conscious is based on a quantitative theory of Integrated Information first proposed by neuroscientist and psychiatrist Giulio Tononi—a theory that draws on Aristotle's notion of formal causality.

But in Koch's view, the possibility of consciousness need not be tied to any particular material substrate: the "brain" could be biological or silicon. The emergence of consciousness depends on a system whose parts causally interact with each other to a degree that can be quantified (by the Greek letter Φ in this case), and is by definition irreducible. Koch sees this theory offering a way to explain "why certain types of highly organized matter, in particular brains, can be conscious. The theory of integrated information…starts with two basic axioms and proceeds to account for the phenomenal in the world. It is not mere speculative philosophy, but leads to concrete neurobiological insights, to the construction of a consciousness-meter that can assess the extent of awareness in animals, babies, sleepers, patients, and others who can't talk about their experiences."

Koch expands on this idea in his recent book, *The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness Is Widespread But Can't Be Computed.* There he argues that such a theory of integrated information reflects Aristotle's usage of formal causality, derived from the Latin *in-formare*, to give form or shape to. "Integrated information gives rise to the cause-effect structure, a form. Integrated information is causal, intrinsic, and qualitative: it is assessed from the inner perspective of a system, based on how its mechanisms and its present state shape its own past and future. How the system constrains its past and future states determines whether the experience feels like azure blue or the smell of a wet dog."

Max Tegmark is also a proponent of Information Integration Theory (IIT). In his book *Life 3.0*, he writes:

> I'd been arguing for decades that consciousness is the way information feels when being processed in certain complex ways. IIT agrees with this and replaces my vague phrase 'certain complex ways' by a precise definition: the information processing needs to be integrated, that is, Φ needs to be large. Giulio's argument for this is as powerful as it is simple: the conscious system needs to be integrated into a unified whole, because if it instead consisted of two independent parts, then they'd feel like two separate conscious entities rather than one. In other words, if a conscious part of a brain or computer can't communicate with the rest, then the rest can't be part of its subjective experience.

Not everyone agrees with this theory, or thinks it's a fruitful place to start a discussion about machine consciousness. But if Koch and Tegmark are right—if a machine of sufficient complexity could develop not only intelligence but also consciousness—it follows that a machine could also be capable of suffering, a suffering for which its creators would be responsible. Schneider believes it would be the height of hubris to think we will know how to create conscious machine minds, in essence playing God. If we create machines that can feel pain, will they have any rights? It may be easier to think of AI as merely a tool at our service when we assume that it cannot be conscious. For what is a *conscious* tool if not a slave? "We have to be sensitive to the dystopian possibilities," Schneider warns.

What does it mean for the future of humanity if we are soon sharing our living space with machines that have a sense of self? What if Judea Pearl's dream comes true and we can design machines capable of resisting temptation, or yielding to it? Whether this kind of strong AI comes sooner or later or not at all, what already seems clear is that the pursuit of machine intelligence, in parallel with the study of our own human intelligence in neuroscience, requires a degree of caution and metaphysical humility. "We should be very humbled by the prospect of creating other forms of intelligence," Schneider said. "And especially humbled by the potential for those forms of intelligence to be conscious, because we don't even understand consciousness well in humans yet."

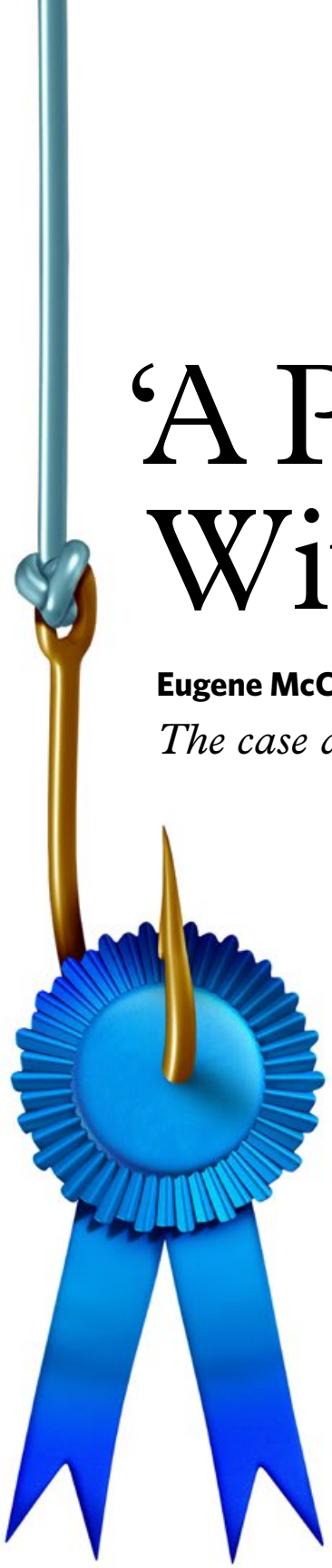
If we want to create AI that is conscious in the same way we are, should we be building it in something like the way that evolution built us?

JOHN W. FARRELL *is the author most recently of* The Clock and the Camshaft: And Other Medieval Inventions We Still Can't Live Without.

‘A Providentialism Without God’

Eugene McCarraher

The case against meritocracy



“Democracy can be no more than an aspiration,” muses “Michael Young,” the narrator of Michael Young’s dystopian novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958). (Young cast the novel as a doctoral dissertation, which explains why thirteen publishers originally rejected the manuscript.) Writing in the midst of a workers’ revolt in the year 2034—and echoing the long and illustrious lineage of critics of democracy—“Young” describes and defends the meritocratic regime that replaced the old orders of inherited privilege and popular self-government. Though retaining the theatrical props of representative institutions, the new order is “rule not so much by the people as by the cleverest people; not an aristocracy of birth, not a plutocracy of wealth, but a true meritocracy of talent.” Unlike the previous hierarchies of divine right, nepotism, and riches, meritocracy apportions power, status, and income on the basis of “merit”: “IQ + effort,” as the formula states, measured by a series of intelligence tests that determine an individual’s professional advancement. Where traditional democracy rooted legitimacy in social and political equality, meritocracy redefines democratic promise as “equality of opportunity,” a course of competition, open to all, through which positions in schools, industry, and government are allocated.

BRAIN LIGHT/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

"Young" traces the emergence of the meritocracy and proudly records its achievements: the opening of opportunity to gifted people from all ranks of society ("to imagine merit where none existed" had been the "sanctioned psychosis" of previous elites); the rapid eradication of older forms of entitlement and bigotry; the substitution of scientific and technical knowledge for superstition and moralism. Overthrowing centuries of illegitimate dominion, meritocracy appears to be the consummation of an enlightened utopian reverie: "The world beholds for the first time the spectacle of a brilliant class," the narrator raves, "the five percent of the nation who know what five percent means."

Yet in that very remark "Young" reveals the ambivalence that mars his otherwise celebratory tale, for despite its ostensibly fair, benign, and commonsensical ideal of authority, meritocracy produces the most insufferable ruling class in history. Because their status has been ratified by a supposedly objective standard, and because they think they've received what they truly deserve, the meritocratic elite is "no longer weakened by self-doubt and self-criticism." Equating worth with credentialed intelligence, and convinced by the impeccable testing regimen of their own existential preeminence, they reckon that "their social inferiors are inferiors in other ways as well." Dismissing the commoners as incorrigible rubes, they neither possess nor seek to cultivate "sympathy with the people whom they govern." Hoarding their advantages for their children, the cognoscenti become as tenaciously entrenched as any earlier caste of patricians. "By imperceptible degrees," "Young" laments, "an aristocracy of birth has turned into an aristocracy of talent."

By the end of the novel, the new aristocracy is facing an angry and bloody comeuppance. At first, the vast majority believe themselves worthy of the meritocrats' scorn; in the sleek lexicon of professionalism, "worker" becomes a badge of dishonor, replaced with "common technician." Because the meritocratic ethos has eroded religious notions of inherent worth, for the first time in history "the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard." The less talented submit to the verdict of the standardized tests and accept that "they *are* inferior." But slowly the unmeritorious regain a sense of their intrinsic dignity; they rise to challenge the hubris and even the legitimacy of the meritocrats. This resistance stems from two unlikely sources: unable to reconcile their professional imperatives with their romantic and maternal desires, talented young women forge a revolutionary alliance with the "common technicians." In the "Chelsea Manifesto" (named for London's renowned bohemian quarter), the rebels call for "socialism": a society in which people are evaluated, not simply in terms of intelligence or occupation, but "according to their kindness and their courage, their imagination and sensitivity, their sympathy and generosity." Repudiating the quantitative and instrumentalist rubrics of "merit," they issue an expansive affirmation of all human talents and qualities:

> Who would be able to say that the scientist was superior to the porter with admirable qualities as a father, the civil servant with unusual skill at gaining prizes superior to the lorry-driver with unusual skill at growing roses?

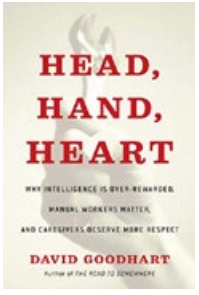
Were we to answer that question honestly, they conclude, "there could be no classes."

The reader never gets to see the denouement of the rebellion—"Young," the narrator, is killed before he finishes his page proofs. (In the ultimate act of meritocratic failure, he literally perishes before he publishes.) But Young himself—the real author, not the fictional narrator—was one of the more prescient and troubling prophets of our moment in history. His novel foreshadows our own meritocracy's harsh and inexorable appointment with Nemesis. Since the Occupy Wall Street movement took off in 2011, the brilliant classes of the North Atlantic world have been under mounting and sometimes violent assault, discredited by a slow-burning bonfire of meritocratic vanities: two needless and protracted imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the virtual collapse of capitalism in 2008–2009 and the fragile, inequitable recovery; four decades of stagnant wages and increasingly precarious employment, accompanied by an upward redistribution of wealth toward capital and its corporate stewards; a flagrantly corrupt, dysfunctional, and plutocratic political system. Some of the "populist" movements of our day exhibit the morbid symptoms of a general crisis of meritocracy: Brexit, Trumpism, the *gilets jaunes* in France, irascible and deadly skepticism about scientific responses to the COVID pandemic, the metastasis of bizarre and grisly conspiracy theories such as QAnon.

Skepticism about the pretensions of our cognitive elite has taken root even in the citadels of meritocracy: in *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael J. Sandel, a professor of government at Harvard, writes that meritocracy has "failed as a mode of governance." Two other recent books—David Goodhart's *Head, Hand, Heart* and Fredrik deBoer's *The Cult of Smart*—arrive at the same conclusion from different angles of approach. Together, the three books make a comprehensive case against our current meritocratic hierarchy.

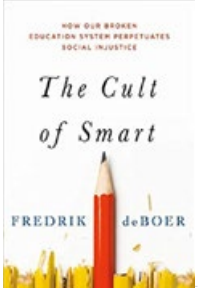
THE TYRANNY OF MERIT
What's Become of the Common Good?

MICHAEL J. SANDEL
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$28 | 288 pp.



HEAD, HAND, HEART
Why Intelligence Is Over-Rewarded, Manual Workers Matter, and Caregivers Deserve More Respect

DAVID GOODHART
Free Press
$27 | 368 pp.



THE CULT OF SMART
How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice

FREDRIK DEBOER
All Points Books
$28.99 | 288 pp.

Defining moral, political, and ideological issues as problems of technical or managerial know-how, meritocratic politicians abandon the antiquated rhetoric of justice and fellowship.

Is this hierarchy worth reforming and preserving, or should we hasten its well-deserved demise? Subjected to the scrutiny not only of history, but also of philosophical and theological reflection, the techno-financial meritocracy of neoliberal capitalism earns a failing grade. It excels in the esoteric arts and sciences of avarice, but its pecuniary acumen obscures its greater talents for ineptitude, blandness, condescension, and carnage. Uncritical devotees of what deBoer calls the "Cult of Smart"—the adulation of scholastic achievement as the indubitable measure of human worth—our meritocratic overlords have been virtuosi of insipid conformism, acquiescing in the moldiest platitudes of "innovation" and imperial exceptionalism.

As Young rightly foresaw, the dismantling of meritocracy entails a socialist transformation of our political economy, one in which, as Goodhart contends, the ascendency of "the Head"—cognitive labor—gives way to equality with "the Hand and the Heart"—manual and caring labor. We need, he writes, to include "a wider range of human aptitudes in our allocation of reward and prestige." But this democratic reconstruction of society requires a cultural revolution as well: a reaffirmation of bodily and emotional experience, and a thoroughgoing rejection of the morality of "desert" in favor of grace, gratitude, and gift. "Wisdom," as Goodhart hopes, "is due for a comeback."

Sandel traces the Western genealogy of the meritocratic ethos to two ancient sources: the Platonic ideal of philosopher-rulers and the Hebrew conviction that God rewards the good and punishes the evil according to their deserts. In the *Republic*, Plato's epistocracy undergoes an intensive physical, moral, and intellectual tutelage that qualifies them for leadership. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Yahweh admonishes the people that obedience to the Torah will lead to long life and prosperity, while dereliction will provoke divine wrath, suffering, and even dispossession from the Promised Land. This moral theology of just deserts took a Christian form with Pelagius (the patron saint of over-achievers) who maintained that human beings were perfectly capable of freely living lives of righteousness. Yet Greek tragedians such as Euripides contradicted Plato's alignment of talent and reward, while for Jews and Christians the Book of Job dispelled any delusion that fortune was commensurate with merit: the whole point of the story is that happiness and hardship bear no relationship to virtue and vice. The point is underscored in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus informs the crowd that God sends the sun and rain on the righteous and the reprobate alike.

Despite its insistence that salvation was predestined and therefore utterly unmerited, Calvinist theology provided an ironic warrant for modern meritocracy. Forging what became "the Protestant work ethic," Calvinists contended that sedulous worldly activity was both a sign of God's favor and a way to assuage the anxiety of not knowing if one was indeed among the elect. The Protestant ethic gradually sloughed off its theological casing and morphed into an ideology of striving, in which wealth and achievement became tokens of merit—a "providentialism without God," as Sandel puts it. The Founding Fathers of the United States espoused a post-Protestant, liberal-republican form of this complacency, upholding "Men of Merit" idealized from their own propertied, classically educated selves. Against the decadence of the Old World nobility, Thomas Jefferson posed a "natural aristocracy" that united "virtue and talent." As Sandel notes, this linkage of morality and ability was central to this elitist vision; like Plato's sages and Israel's people, this "natural aristocracy" would blend intellectual strength with moral rectitude.

Beginning with nineteenth-century nostrums of "self-help," "self-culture," and "the career open to talents," the mythology of merit has been a powerful solvent of the rights of inherited prerogative. Nobles might endow their nitwit children with titles, fortunes, and estates, but with smarts and perseverance any plucky poor boy could hustle his way into riches and status. At the same time, education was widely seen not as an instrument of "social mobility" but rather as a necessity for popular participation in governance. Pointing to the work of Christopher Lasch, Sandel reminds us that early educational reformers envisioned not a meritocracy, but rather "a general diffusion of intelligence and learning across all classes and vocations." Robustly egalitarian, this democratic faith in "diffusion" remained in tension with the liberal ideal of "mobility."

Of course, even this faith reflected the perennial American delusion that some sort of fraternal, classless society could be built on the foundations of capitalism. Yet if "diffusion" proceeded in tandem with ruthless competitive struggle, the maelstrom of market society in the nineteenth century precluded any rationalized system of meritocracy. In the unregulated industrial capitalism that prevailed in Britain and the United States, profitable but deceptive displays of proficiency abounded in the marketplace; without certified affirmations of talent, fraud and buncombe could masquerade as ability. What Goodhart calls "the rise of the cognitive class" began in the nexus of a peculiar historical conjuncture: the evolution of a corpo-

rate, bureaucratic capitalism that required managerial and professional expertise, and the birth of the modern university, with its dedication to the "practical" as well as the "liberal" arts. Enlarging the scope of meritocratic enterprise with employment in new technical and supervisory fields, corporations saw an opportunity to offload instruction in these skills onto universities, which happily—and lucratively—appropriated the responsibility for professional training.

Our meritocracy emerged from the development of this educational-industrial complex. Until the mid-twentieth century, a fledgling meritocratic ideal competed with the hoary reality of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant aristocracy. In the wake of World War II, James B. Conant, president of Harvard University, engineered a "meritocratic coup d'etat" that swiftly displaced the old-boy network. Scandalized by the persistence of a hereditary upper class, Conant championed the creation of merit-based scholarships and a national system of standardized testing, the latter capped by the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Purportedly blind to class or ethnicity, this leviathan "sorting machine" would identify and discipline the new class of mandarins, empower the formerly marginalized, and institute a competitive model of social equality—"equality of opportunity." This was really a brand of merit-based inequality in which wealth and power could be justified as proper compensations for accredited skill and diligence (in other words, "IQ + effort"). Yet by viewing education as a well-mannered scramble up "the ladder of opportunity," Conant exemplified the confusion at the heart of liberal democratic meritocracy: the belief that social mobility would lead to some sort of "classless" society, uneasily aligned with a recognition that, as Sandel puts it, "sorting for talent and seeking equality are two different projects."

By the 2000s, the meritocratic ideal had become both the Platonism of the upper-middle classes and the moral imagination of neoliberal capitalism. This is deBoer's "Cult of Smart": a credulous and subtly malevolent reverence for scholastic and professional accomplishment. In what he calls his "prayer for the untalented," deBoer—a prolific essayist and self-proclaimed "revolutionary socialist"—outlines the tenets of this Cult and embarks on a caustic errand of desecration. The Cult of Smart enjoins that "academic value is the only value" and that "intelligence [is] the only true measure of human worth." Yet, according to deBoer, these highbrow dogmas only camouflage the Cult's true trinity of veneration: "money, access, and power," admission to which is the "secret function" of the meritocracy. The Cult of Smart rests on two equally fallacious articles of faith: equality of opportunity—"liberalism's greatest lie," deBoer declares, "a way for progressive people to give their blessing to inequality"—and "the myth of just deserts," the preposterous conviction, belied by the slightest acquaintance with everyday life, that "we more or less receive what we deserve" and that "our station is determined by our work ethic and our talent."

The Cult of Smart has spread, as Sandel sees, into the broader mainstream culture, where all too often "being smart" possesses "more persuasive heft than being right." Since the advent of the digital age and the spread of algorithmic technologies, "smart" has become a way to describe not just people but things and policies as well: "smart cars," "smart

ROMAN BABAKIN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Entrance gates at Harvard Yard

phones," "smart homes," "smart thermostats," even "smart bombs." The cachet of "smart" is increasingly integral to neoliberal commodity fetishism. Perhaps even more insidiously, "smart" now describes the mode of governance preferred by neoliberal elites, a tendency manifest especially among the Democratic Party establishment, who conceive of politics as the management of popular obeisance to meritocrats. "At the heart of smart power are smart people," Hillary Clinton once proclaimed. Barack Obama used "smart" over nine hundred times to describe his timid and pluto-fawning policies.

"Smart" beckons to the supersession of democracy by a benevolent aristocracy of meritocrats. Defining moral, political, and ideological issues as problems of technical or managerial know-how, meritocratic politicians abandon the antiquated rhetoric of justice and fellowship, and seek to abort political struggle in favor of compromise, "bipartisanship," and the finessing of market forces. As Sandel laments, this dispassionate and technocratic conception of politics "abandons the project of political persuasion" in favor of lecturing and shaming. This cavalier badgering becomes all the easier as more and more meritocrats no longer share space with the less educated: in Goodhart's taxonomy (borrowed from the late Roger Scruton), meritocrats are "Anywheres" who prize geographical as well as social mobility, while all other people are "Somewheres," who value security, place, and familiarity. With Anywheres increasingly cloistered in their own enclaves of privilege, meritocratic hauteur slowly induces a "corrosion of the civic sensibilities," leading to its own peculiar kinds of insularity and parochialism. (Clinton's stupid and contemptuous derision of Trump supporters as "a basket of deplorables" epitomized an ill-concealed disdain for large swaths of the American populace.) Indifferent to and even dismissive of the wisdom of the uncredentialed—"credentialism," Sandel observes, "is the last acceptable prejudice"—meritocrats reflect and affirm "an impoverished conception of citizenship and freedom."

Meritocratic liberals in particular seem utterly clueless about the nature of political conflict and rhetoric. Ever the sanctimonious nerds seeking the teacher's approval, they believe that political conflict turns on the marshaling of information—not the mobilization of interests, the creation of compelling narratives, and an appeal to the moral or even religious imaginations of the electorate. (In politics, Goodhart remarks, "the Heart usually trumps the Head"—even among the better-educated. This is why "fact-checking" conservatives—the strategy of tiresome liberal comedians and political commentators—was and always will be little more than a show of intellectual vanity.) Relying on statistics embellished with their own self-importance and patriotic bombast ("America is already great"), meritocrats display a resolutely *West Wing* understanding of politics, with Aaron Sorkin as the voluble Shakespeare of the neoliberal intelligentsia.

As all three authors suggest, the most delicious irony of meritocratic ideology is that it's not really all that smart on its own terms. Money may not buy you love, but it certainly buys you "merit." As deBoer and Sandel both point out, our meritocracy is fast becoming a hereditary aristocracy of money and education. Numerous studies have indicated that SAT scores are closely correlated with wealth, and that universities have facilitated not social mobility, but further class consolidation. As Sandel mordantly observes, "American higher education is like an elevator in a building that most people enter on the top floor." "The game is still rigged," deBoer shrugs. "It just justifies itself with an empty rhetoric of freedom and fairness."

The critique of meritocracy goes deeper, however, than its meretricious claims about "mobility." DeBoer is most devastating when he smashes the idols of "progressive" educational theory, much of which is little more, in his view, than a farrago of upbeat boilerplate. He dismisses the "progressive" educational cliché that each of us is, in his words, an "endlessly moldable lump of clay," and that all any of us need to achieve intellectual excellence is better schools and teachers. In this view, because we have no natural talents or inclinations, our outcomes in any fair competition are the results of our own laziness. This is wrong and even "actively cruel," deBoer thinks: it suggests that those who don't make it up the ladder of opportunity deserve their measly lots in life, and it sustains the dubious and vindictive morality of "getting what we deserve," thus conferring a liberal sanction on poverty and inequality. It also perpetuates one of the most perennial of liberal panaceas: the belief that education is "a proxy for our society's greatest ills," and that schools, not movements or political parties, are the most effective vehicles for social transformation.

DeBoer's insistence on the significance of genetics in determining intellectual and other abilities is surely the most contentious feature of his book. Differences in intelligence and other qualities *do* have an important genetic basis, he maintains on

the basis of a host of studies in behavioral genetics, parenting, and adoption, as well as (perhaps less convincingly) an appeal to our everyday intuitions. While acknowledging that the invocation of genetics raises legitimate fears of racism (recall Charles Murray and *The Bell Curve* controversy), deBoer credits the scientific evidence and holds that we should nonetheless improve educational conditions for everyone, regardless of genetic endowment. Whatever one makes of his argument about genetics, his conclusion should be uncontroversial: school everyone to the extent of their ability and give everyone what they need to flourish. As deBoer rightly attests, the great traditions of the Left have never shared the liberal bourgeois passion for "equality" defined as some unreal, abstract equivalence of persons. "From each according to ability, to each according to need" is precisely *not* a recipe for such a specious "equality."

This reminder of equality in difference animates Goodhart's most passionate concern: that meritocratic elitism has denigrated manual and caring forms of labor and cognition. The "head," in his terms, belittles the "hand" and the "heart." Following Matthew Crawford, Richard Sennett, and other enthusiasts of craft and artisanal labor, Goodhart—a founder of *Prospect* magazine and a former director of the think tank Demos—sings the praises of work that's more tactile and proximate to the material world. The intimate relationship between the maker and the thing, or the caregiver and the person, blurs the distinction between subject and object, enabling the self to become more capacious by uniting it with something outside itself. Carpentry and nursing, for instance, bring together abstract and palpable knowledge into productive familiarity. More than head work, which often alienates us from the delights of the physical world, the labor of the hand or the heart affords us "the pleasure of being immanent." They also rely on the unquantifiable quotients of emotional and corporeal intelligence—knowledge of the texture and contours of feeling, or the resonance of the tangible world.

As a longtime instructor to the children of the elite, Sandel is, of the three, the most perspicacious critic of the meritocratic credo. (On occasion, he alludes to arguments with his students, who vociferously defend their "well-earned" positions in their Ivy League elysium of merit.) The author of several books on political philosophy—including *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982), *Democracy's Discontent* (1996), and *What Money Can't Buy* (2012)—Sandel has devoted his intellectual career to exploring the meaning of justice, and in his most recent volume he makes what is arguably his most incisive and radical analysis. From his perch at Harvard, perhaps the foremost temple of the Cult of Smart, Sandel declares that the fundamental problem with meritocracy "is not that we have failed to achieve it but that the ideal is flawed."

Sandel inveighs against the human costs of the meritocratic demiurge. Even for those affluent and talented enough to ride high on the educational elevator, the ascent is a morally and spiritually destructive exercise in self-discipline. Meritocratic asceticism deforms the young from an early age, imposing what Sandel characterizes as "soul-destroying demands": the right kindergartens and elementary schools; the expensive tutors, prep courses and counselors; the obsession with grades that precludes or perverts any love of learning for its own sake; the "extracurricular activities" pursued for the résumé rather than for pleasure; the internecine combat for placement in advanced academic tracks and classes; the college essay, application, and interview, all designed to be perfectly suave and inoffensive. It's hard to see how any passion for beauty or capacity for defiance could emerge from so joyless an education, the wellsprings of poetry or revolution having been so thoroughly dammed up and poisoned. As William Deresiewicz showed in *Excellent Sheep* (2014), many successful adolescents and undergraduates are profoundly unhappy and alienated—"wounded winners," as Sandel dubs them, emotionally stunted and politically conformist, well-prepared to take on the smart labor of accumulating capital and patrolling the boundaries of permissible discussion.

What is to be done about our new aristocracy? To some degree, nothing, Goodhart suggests, as the meritocrats are busy downsizing their own ranks by promoting technological development. As artificial intelligence enables the automation of intellectual as well as manual skill, capitalism will need fewer workers with advanced degrees—in other words, fewer meritocrats. Contrary to the hype from business and tech circles since the 1980s, "the knowledge economy," Goodhart writes, "does not need an ever-growing supply of knowledge workers." Thus, rather than steering people into competition for the work of the head, technologically advanced societies should develop "a far greater appreciation of cognitive diversity," and encourage craft and caregiving by affording them greater respect and remuneration.

While Goodhart appears to think that the power of the cognitive classes can be bridled without any radical transformation of social and economic life, deBoer and Sandel propose more far-reaching structural and cultural changes. Upholding "the

Meritocrats display a resolutely West Wing understanding of politics, with Aaron Sorkin as the voluble Shakespeare of the neoliberal intelligentsia.

The meritocratic ethic has no room for the idea that chance or contingency or grace has any role in human affairs.

equal right of all people to the good life," deBoer calls on us to disavow equality of opportunity and instead embrace "equality of economic and social outcomes." As a socialist, deBoer rejects the liberal bromide of merely mitigating the harsh impact of meritocratic failure; the goal, he insists, should be "increasing worker power, not just decreasing poverty." Although he doesn't flesh out this ideal of workplace democracy, it is, I think, the most direct political attack on meritocracy: reclaiming control of the workplace from the "complex" and recondite knowledge of managerial specialists. (From the earliest days of scientific management, palaver about "complexity" has always been a nimble technocratic ruse.) DeBoer's call for socialism comports with Sandel's hope for "lowering the stakes" of winning the educational arms race by weakening if not severing the link between professional success and university education—a rupture, I would add, that could be accomplished only through the relocation of professional training in worker-controlled enterprises.

At their most compelling, Sandel, Goodhart, and deBoer are all less interesting for the institutional changes they endorse than for the transvaluation of values they envision: overthrowing the insolent and self-righteous regime of "opportunity" and "desert." No matter how bourgeois-bohemian they may seem, meritocrats remain more bourgeois than bohemian: they believe that their power and wealth mark their own assiduously nurtured talent. There are obvious objections to this conceit—the significance of conditions outside of one's control, the bungling or even horrific decisions that meritocrats have made over the decades—but the best retort is that talent itself is a matter of radical contingency. Smart people may pride themselves for working hard in school, but as Goodhart writes, they "no more *earn* their upbringing or innate intelligence than they earn being born into a rich family." Having a talent is a matter of luck, our authors agree; it's a gift, and you don't *earn* a gift. Indeed, as Sandel points out, living in a society that values your talents is also an accident of birth. The recognition of talent as a gratuity invalidates centuries of unctuous humbug about the right of the obscenely wealthy to their riches. As Sandel argues with a subtle but bracing audacity, "if our talents are gifts for which we are indebted—whether to the genetic lottery or to God—then it is a mistake and a conceit to assume we deserve the benefits that flow from them." The meritocratic ethic has no room for the idea that chance or contingency or grace has any role in human affairs. But the admission of grace and contingency into the heart of our moral universe, far from rendering us lazy or amoral, would make us less self-satisfied and more magnanimous and open-hearted.

Uncoupling talent from desert would constitute enough of a moral revolution, but deBoer goes one step farther, by objecting to "desert" itself. We should not, he believes, invent better ways of adjusting reward to talent or achievement; rather, we should seek "the elimination of the very ideal of just deserts." Because it assumes some sort of equality in human needs and capabilities, we must cast into historical oblivion the notion that we should only receive as much as we give. Especially now, in a world of abundance, we can supply everyone with what they need—and then some.

Such a democratic vista was espoused by the British socialist R. H. Tawney—historian, social philosopher, and *éminence grise* of the Labour Party. While *Equality* (1931), his remarkable treatise on the subject, is perhaps best known for its rebuttal of the libertarian canard that equality stifles freedom, its more salient and fundamental argument is that real equality is not lusterless uniformity. The egalitarian goal of socialists, Tawney contended, should be to foster "cohesion and solidarity" by making "the external conditions of health and civilization a common possession." A socialist society would feature "a high level of general culture" and "a strong sense of common interests." But socialists did not and should not deny the reality of human differences; rather, they sought to ensure that "inequalities of personal capacity" would be neither "concealed nor exaggerated by inequalities which have their source in social arrangements." No morality of just deserts here: while opportunity would abound in such a world, men and women would still be able "to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not." It's an astute, humane, and generous ideal, more respectful of human diversity than all the shibboleths of the meritocrats. It imagines a world where the study of physics would be level with the growing of roses.

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Commonweal

JOHN GARVEY CONVERSATIONS *on*

Spirituality *in a* Time of Reckoning

These virtual events are brought to you in memory of longtime Commonweal *columnist John Garvey, whose writings on faith and contemporary life continue to inspire special projects, features, and events at* Commonweal.

A year ago, Pope Francis invited us to see the era we're living in now as a "place of metanoia." How do we heed these words in the wake of all that has happened since? For many Americans, the accumulation of violence, loss, isolation, and division has been difficult to process and respond to. As we await a post-pandemic future, let's not let this moment of critical reflection slip away from us—let's grapple with grief, anger, and metanoia. This June, join us for a three-part series on "Spirituality in a Time of Reckoning" to explore how our individual and collective spiritual experiences might move us toward that place of transformation and healing.

THURSDAYS in June at 3:00 pm ET/12:00 pm PT

On Grief

Nancy Pineda-Madrid
in conversation with
Claudia Avila Cosnahan

JUNE 10

On Righteous Anger

Cecilia González-Andrieu & Marcia Chatelain
moderated by
Vinson Cunningham

JUNE 17

On Metanoia

Fr. Bryan Massingale & Janet Ruffing
moderated by
Matthew Sitman

JUNE 24

Events are free and will happen on Zoom. Registration is required.

To register, visit: **CWLMAG.ORG/EVENTS**

An interview with Maria Hinojosa

Tell Me Your Story

Regina Munch

Maria Hinojosa's nearly thirty-year career as a journalist includes reporting for PBS, CNN, and NPR, as well as anchoring and producing the Peabody Award–winning radio program Latino USA. *She is a frequent guest on MSNBC, and has won several awards, including four Emmys and the Edward R. Murrow Award from the Overseas Press Club. In 2010, she founded Futuro Media, an independent nonprofit whose multimedia content provides a platform for people often overlooked by mainstream journalism. Hinojosa spoke with assistant editor Regina Munch about her career in media, her recent memoir,* Once I Was You, *and her work informing readers and listeners about the changing cultural and political landscape in America. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

REGINA MUNCH: You begin your memoir with the story of your encounter with a group of children who were being held in immigration detention in Texas. Could you tell us about it?

MARIA HINOJOSA: When I was writing the book, I called on the words of my mentor Sandra Cisneros. She said that you don't always have to write about what you remember. You can write about what you've forgotten, or things that are so ugly that you want to forget them. This was a scene that came to mind: the trafficking of children.

I encountered this group of kids in the McAllen airport at 7 a.m., and they're all wearing these really ill-fitting sweatsuits. Kids in an airport are usually happy and bouncing around, but these kids were numb. I had a moment to speak with one of these children, whom the previous president had labeled a threat to this country.

When I cover stories, I want to see people's humanity. As an immigrant growing up in this country, I wanted people to see my humanity and I was taught to see other people's humanity. This was an important tool to me as a journalist. If you give humanity, you're going to get humanity back, and I think that makes for better journalism.

RM: In your memoir you write, "To me being a reporter meant seeing the humanity in everyone, especially people who are perceived as invisible, and then making it hyper-visible to others."

MH: When you grow up feeling invisible, it has an impact on you. In my case, there was just the general invisibility of being a Mexican immigrant on the south side of Chicago. Later, it was the fact that I began to see women journalists in Mexico, but they didn't exist in the United States. When you don't see yourself, then you think that your story is not valid, that you don't exist. The long-term impact could have been that I internalized that invisibility and let it shut me down. Instead, because I have privilege, I was able to understand the invisibility and make a commitment as a journalist to fight against it.

KEVIN ABOSCH

Maria Hinojosa

RM: What stories have you made visible that were invisible before you showed them to people?

MH: I was the first Latina correspondent hired at NPR, so of course I was going to have a different perspective. I would say, "We live in Washington D.C. Did you all know that there's a huge Salvadoran population here?" This was in 1985 and nobody had reported about it. Salvadorans were in Washington D.C. because they were refugees in the 1980s, as they are today.

When I was an assistant producer, I produced a piece about crack, and we happened to interview somebody who was a sex worker. His name was Hawk, and when he told us his story, you understood a little bit more who he was, instead of the usual racially charged headlines. When I got to CNN many years later, they used to call me the Bronx Bureau Chief because CNN had never sent a reporter up to the Bronx to cover a story.

People know me for doing this in places like New York, but I just did this in an interview in Boise, Idaho. People have reduced Idaho to potatoes and white supremacists, but it's much more complex. I like to go to places that are misunderstood, misrepresented, flyover, forgotten, and in those places find the most forgotten people.

RM: At the beginning of the Obama presidency when you were reporting on immigration policy, conditions in detention camps weren't really on the radar. What was happening at that time?

MH: What's important for people to realize is that we did just live through something quite horrific together as a country: the taking of children as a form of policy punishment. But the sad thing is that this did not start in 2015 when Donald Trump began running for office and insulting Mexicans. What people need to understand is that there is a narrative about the United States of America: that we are an immigrant-loving, refugee-loving country. It's a nice narrative, but it's not exactly true. It's more complicated than that. If we want to be a country that loves immigrants, everybody has to actively fight for it in the same way that people are taking on the task of being anti-racist.

And it's not just one party. Bill Clinton started building the wall; he ran on an anti-immigrant platform. George H. W. Bush was actually really good for Central American refugees. His Republican administration significantly increased the number of refugees allowed into this country. Obama became the deporter-in-chief, and shame on him. There is a long history of this happening, and what we just witnessed was the worst example of it. We know that babies have been taken from their parents and we know that women's uteruses have been taken from them unwillingly. I think that's enough to say this needs to stop.

RM: What would an immigrant- and refugee-loving country look like?

MH: I like to make a joke: let's imagine what it would look like if immigrant-friendly and POC-friendly journalists were running our news media. Imagine if the headlines were: "Mexican people are the hardest-working, sweetest people ever! You know how we all like to take vacations there? They're coming here, and we love them!" The next day another headline: "The Somali people have the most fascinating traditions and we're going to learn all about them. We're going to get informed about another part of the world." And another: "Can you imagine how many interesting and fascinating people you're going to be able to fall in love with?"

I'm being facetious, but given all we've lived through, that's kind of what it's going to have to look like. We'll need a national day of mourning and reconciliation for the horrors brought upon these people, people who wanted to believe in what the United States says it's about. It's false advertising, and it continues today. The Biden administration is announcing these wonderful executive orders, but at the same time they're saying, "Oh, but don't come to the United States right now, this isn't a great time." That is an insult to people who are refugees. That's like saying to people escaping Nazi Germany, "Could you choose a better time?" Or to the people of Vietnam: "Can you just wait a little while? We're not ready." No. I don't accept that.

RM: We've seen a resurgence of Christian nationalism and how Christianity has been used to discriminate against people coming to this country, especially people of color. Is there a role that you see for religious belief or spirituality in welcoming people and fighting racism?

MH: You all have the role to play. This is your moment to lead. I was talking with a Lyft driver who said he loved Trump because Trump is motivated only by love, because he doesn't need any money. It was around Christmastime, and the driver said something about Jesus blessing me. And I said, "Sir, I hope you understand that if Jesus came knocking on the doors of this country as a refugee—which is what he was—he and Mary and Joseph would be forced to sleep on the concrete in Mexico, in Matamoros or Juárez or Río Piedras. That's what the policy looks like." I spoke from the heart. And this man said, "Oh my God, I didn't know."

Absolutely, you are on the front lines. People see me and there might be an element of distrust because I'm Mexican, I'm an immigrant, I'm a journalist. I'm not Christian, I'm no longer Catholic. I was raised Catholic, but I'm deeply spiritual. People may not trust the words coming from me. But at its base, the conversation is about love—loving the one most different from you, those who have been humiliated. That is what Jesus Christ represents to me. In my world, as a journalist, I attempt to keep my humility because the people I'm talking to often have nothing, the same way that Mary and Joseph had nothing. Those are the people that Jesus Christ identified with. You are on the front lines, and I have

so much trust and hope and faith in the conversations that your communities need to be having.

RM: Where do you see humility operative today? What do we need from journalists in particular?

MH: What we need in certain parts of the profession is humility and what we need in other parts of the profession is more ego. With most of the journalism we consume, the buck ultimately stops with an older heterosexual man of privilege. We have all basically been raised to believe that they represent objectivity and fairness. When you have that kind of power, it builds up your ego and you believe that you're right.

They need to be more humble. They need to do more listening. They need to understand history and read history from a perspective that is not a white man's, written by the likes of Frederick Douglass, for example, my founding father as a journalist. How was he reading and interpreting this country, and doing journalism about this country? Ida B. Wells was born into slavery and becomes an investigative journalist. When she investigated lynchings, she was told by white male journalists, "Why are you reporting about lynchings? Do you have some kind of political agenda?" Today what we need are more independent journalists of color and of conscience. The field of journalism has been one of the slowest to "diversify," which I dislike as a term. At this point, all I want to talk about is excellence in journalism. I'm done talking about equity representation, the right thing, the market value. If you do not have a newsroom that looks like America, then there is no way that you can be creating excellent journalism. Period.

RM: In your memoir, you write about a certain song that your cousin sang to you. What did it teach you about your identity?

MH: I'm going to go one step further and tell you a little bit more about my cousin. I love him very much, but he has become judgmental and exclusionary of people. He was talking with my mom, who is an American citizen but is a Mexican through and through. In a heated argument about Mexican politics, he says to her, "You're an American citizen. You don't have a valuable opinion about what happens in Mexico. You need to go back to the United States." My cousin is telling my Mexican mom to go back to the United States!

I said to him, "You were the one who saw me for what I was. You would never have sent me back to the United States when I was a little girl. In those rainy afternoons in Mexico City summers, you used to sing to me '*La Golondrina*'—the swallow." In the song, the lyrics are, "You come and you go, you come and you go, but you always come back." The bird migrates. He would say to me, "You, my little cousin, migrate back and forth. You're always crossing the border, but you always come back." I reminded him of this, and I said, "That's who you are, *primo*, not somebody who is going to stand in judgment of me." It's not fully resolved, sadly. We're in the process, but it's quite painful.

Journalists need to be more humble. They need to do more listening.

RM: A lot of families are feeling that right now in various ways. I wonder how you approach trying to heal those divides together—not simply to heal, but to come to the truth.

MH: It's really hard to do via Zoom. But I don't fear or walk away from these kinds of conversations. I don't like to say it, but I'm just too old not to have them. I cannot wait to be able to travel to Mexico and sit with my cousin and have a thorough conversation. He was one of the last people that I saw before the pandemic put us into lockdown. And so we had a moment, and that's when he sang me "*La Golondrina*."

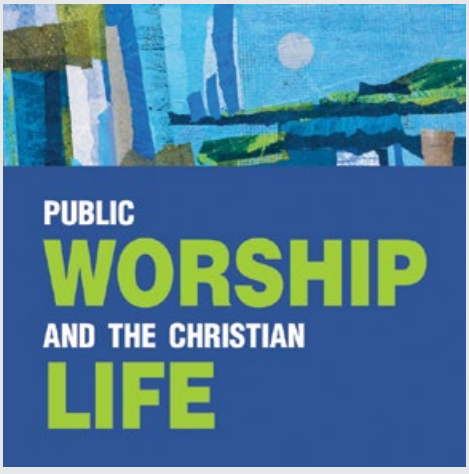
I don't have the answer. It does freak me out to have to have these conversations with members of my own family, but I am committed. I'm not going to stop.

RM: As you were growing up and encountering different aspects of American culture and Mexican culture, sometimes you were made to feel not American enough and sometimes you were made to feel not Mexican enough. But in your memoir, you say that you see yourself in many stories that you've encountered: from Vietnamese refugees to Salvadoran immigrants. What identity ties you together with so many of these different groups?

MH: I think about that. Is it just feeling like the other? Is it that notion of invisibility? Maybe it's the capacity to listen—it's something that I do really well in my profession, but I think as humans, we all have to work on it.

People are asked very rarely to talk about themselves. When I'm interviewing people, they assume, "I don't have an interesting story." And then they start telling these stories and—wow! I find myself reacting like that to most people I meet. I love people's stories and I wish that we would tell each other more of our stories, that people would feel prouder of these stories and less ashamed. It's going to make us be better human beings and neighbors, the more we tell our stories authentically. That means that you have to ask people, "Tell me your story," then you have to listen. And then you have to be prepared to tell your own.

REGINA MUNCH *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.



Public Worship and the Christian Life: Conversations for the Journey

Public Worship and the Christian Life: Conversations for the Journey, is a podcast produced by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. A sampling from the 15 episodes:

- Khristi Lauren Adams—Sacred Lives of Girls of Color
- Justo L. González—Mestizo Character of the Christian Life
- Célestin Musekura—Forgiving as We Have Been Forgiven
- Glenn Packiam—Exploring Christian Hope in a Contemporary Worship
- Deanna A. Thompson—Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World

worship.calvin.edu/podcast

CLASSIFIED

CLIMATE SIGNALS, SUNSET PARK

John Linstrom

after Justin Brice Guariglia's
public art installation, Brooklyn

The traffic sign flashes
pointillistic messages
into the sloping night—

two boys speak softly
in Spanish, sitting
against the weighted base—

its signals, warnings:
CLIMATE CHANGE AT WORK,
VOTA ECO LOGICAMENTE,

HUMAN AGENDA AHEAD
—clouds mirror a feeble
urban glow in gray,

skyline a distant centipede
of luminescent scales, concealing
mown grass, delayed autumn, soft murmurs.

JOHN LINSTROM *is series editor of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Library for Cornell University Press. His poems and nonfiction have recently appeared or are forthcoming in* Atlanta Review, *the* New Criterion, *the* Antioch Review, *and elsewhere.*

ALEJANDRO ANREUS

Shades of Suffering

'Goya's Graphic Imagination'

In 1792, the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746–1828) became gravely ill. His convalescence and recovery lasted for more than a year, leaving him completely deaf. (Lead poisoning was suspected.) Had he died right then, at the age of forty-six, Goya would have been remembered as a competent, even elegant, Rococo painter with realist tendencies, but nothing more. Instead, his illness transformed him into an extraordinary artist, one marked by great emotional depth and inventive formal technique.

There's no denying Goya's prowess as a painter. Just recall his arresting portraits and still lifes, or his masterful frescoes in San Antonio de la Florida Chapel in Madrid. There's also his powerful *Executions of the Third of May 1808* (1814) and his unsettling *Black Paintings* (1819–23), made near the end of his life. To fully grasp the extent of Goya's achievements, though, one must consider his drawings and prints.

Beginning in the mid-1790s, Goya began creating *libretas de apuntes* (journal albums). He used them to sketch a range of visions and impressions of the world with markedly different styles. By the time he died in exile in Bordeaux, Goya had produced some nine hundred drawings and more than three hundred prints, etched in both aquatint and lithograph. (The *libretas* were later taken apart and dispersed, and now exist as individual works.) Since the 1960s, scholars have acknowledged Goya's graphic output as foundational for European and global art. Together with Dürer and Rembrandt, he paved the way for artists like Honoré Daumier, Georges Rouault, Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, and José Clemente Orozco. His influence continues right up to the present day in printmakers as diverse as Kiki Smith and Juan Sánchez.

It's appropriate, then, that the Metropolitan Museum in New York has just opened a new exhibition (the first in recent memory to take place on U.S. soil) focused entirely on Goya's drawings and prints. Containing more than a hundred works (mostly from the Met's permanent collection, supplemented with loans from the Prado, the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, and other libraries in Boston and New York), the show fills three modestly sized galleries. Organized by Mark McDonald, also the principal author of the show's excellent catalog, it's especially refreshing during these days of visual overload. Set against sober, neutral walls, Goya's small, powerful works take us from looking into seeing.

Proceeding chronologically, the show spans nearly half a century. The earliest prints on display are Goya's rather clumsy copies of paintings by Velázquez, dating from the late 1770s. The last are the bold lithographs of *The Bulls of Bordeaux* (1825), along with a handful of drawings made shortly before the artist's death. In between we find several well-known series, including *Los Caprichos*, a satirical set of images from 1799; *The Disasters of War*, a response to the Napoleonic occupation of Spain from 1808–14; the *Tauromaquia* (1816); and the bizarre *Disparates* or *Proverbios* (1815–19), published posthumously more than four decades later. There are also a few single prints.

One of them, *Seated Giant*, stands out. A full foot tall, it's Goya's largest. The giant, filling the frame, is depicted in a night scene. His back turned, he seems to twist toward us, the harsh realism of his body (and its potential for violence) evoking mystery, even fear. This is Goya the master of the grotesque and the fantastic, the heir of Francisco de Quevedo and the progenitor of Luis Buñuel. The print's meaning is elusive. Is *Seated Giant* a monstrous metaphor for the return of the reactionary Spanish King Ferdinand VII? Or is it pure evil let loose upon the world after the butchery of the Peninsular War? Both are possible. Goya's imagery is complex, paradoxical, and layered.

The exhibition also includes several rare drawings, preparatory studies for *Los Caprichos* and *The Disasters of War*. They allow us to glimpse Goya's step-by-step process, the way he subtly alters a

Opposite page:
Francisco Goya,
Seated Giant, 1818

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/HARRIS BRISBANE DICK FUND, 1935

By the time he died in exile in Bordeaux, Goya had produced some nine hundred drawings and more than three hundred prints.

figure or rearranges a composition in order to grab us by the throat. *Los Caprichos* reveal Goya at his sharpest and most biting; here realism works alongside caricature, as Goya wryly skewers the aristocracy, the Church, and the military. Spanish superstitions, hollow civic honors, and the machismo of the artist's time are mocked in favor of tongue-in-cheek celebrations of flinty women and old crones. This is Goya the *ilustrado*, still a believer in the promises of reason, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution.

His faith proved ill-founded. By the time he completed *The Disasters of War*, Goya had witnessed brutal executions and the savage aftermath of massacres. The prints in this series alternate between stark realism and bleak allegory, as heaps of corpses are complemented by men with bat wings (*Against the common good, plate 71*) and insatiable beasts devouring people (*Proud monster, plate 81*). Goya's technique likewise pivots from minimalist, descriptive lines to denser, more expressive baroque weaving. While the *Disparates* extend and deepen this latter tendency, both the *Tauromaquia* (illustrations for a history of bullfighting) and *The Bulls of Bordeaux* offer more realistic celebrations of the bullring. The last four lithographs demonstrate Goya's genius in using a relatively new medium to produce fresh images.

The drawing component of the exhibition is strong, but may leave visitors hungry for a fuller, more complete survey. The earliest drawing on view is a study of a hunter from 1775. Sketched in chalk on blue paper, it's the work of an elegant draftsman in the Rococo tradition of Tiepolo. There is also a pair of magnificent self-portraits in ink, physically small yet monumental in form. Goya's frequent depiction of animals reveals his familiarity with the Italian comic poet Giovanni Battista Casti's 1802 text, *Gli animali parlanti*, politically tinged fables about talking wolves, owls, donkeys, and more, which gave Goya a new vocabulary to critique Spanish society. Some of the most accomplished drawings in the show come from Goya's "Black Border" series (1816–20), in which entire landscapes are rendered with just one or two strokes. *You Won't Get Anywhere by Shouting* depicts

Francisco Goya, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1795–97

a barefoot farmer throwing his hoe to the ground and screaming with rage. It's a powerful metaphor for Goya's anger over the unrealized possibilities of the Enlightenment in Spain.

Missing among the drawings included in the Met show is Goya's last symbolic self-portrait, in which the artist depicts himself as a bearded old man walking with two canes. It features the inscription *Aún aprendo* ("I am still learning"). Drawn with delicate crayon lines, the work suggests a fragile body in possession of an agile mind. It would have been the perfect image to close the exhibition.

Instead, we find *Comer mucho* (c. 1824–28). It means "To Eat a Lot." Another crayon drawing, it depicts a heavy, tonsured friar poised above a toilet, likely about to relieve himself after a substantial meal. The act takes place in a room stocked with sanitary equipment as an amused, teasing figure lurks in the shadows. Endowing his chalk marks with a forceful sweep, Goya presents the well-fed cleric as the antithesis of Christian asceticism, a hypocrite in a famine-stricken nation in which

Francisco Goya, *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, 1797

wars have left many hungry. Goya was no atheist, but (in typical Spanish fashion) he was staunchly anti-clerical, a fact attested to here with his signature blend of humor and vitriol.

Goya completed his last painting in March of 1828. He suffered a seizure on April 2, received Last Rites a week later, and died on April 16. Susan Sontag, remarking on the moral depth of Goya's work, especially his attention to sorrow, once claimed that "with Goya, a new standard for responsiveness to suffering entered art." This exhibition is proof.

ALEJANDRO ANREUS *is Professor of Art History and Latin American Studies at William Paterson University. His book* Havana in the 1940s *is forthcoming from University of California Press.*

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO

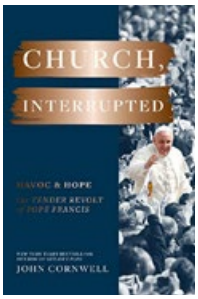
A Welcome Interruption

AUSTEN IVEREIGH

Every new book on the Francis pontificate has the advantage of being more up-to-date than its predecessors, and John Cornwell manages to squeeze in the Amazon synod and even "Francis in the Time of Coronavirus." Yet for all its breadth and range, and the qualities that a veteran Church reporter brings to such a project, *Church, Interrupted* does not seek to be a systematic chronology of the Francis years. It is too perceptive, personal, quirky, and emotionally involved, which turns out to be its strength.

In asides at the start and close of the book and scattered throughout the text, the British writer and Cambridge academic shares the story of his intense but painful relationship with the Catholicism of his childhood, and the frosting of his ecclesial faith in later life. Cornwell was appalled by the abuse scandals and oppressive ecclesiastical culture—as he saw it—of the John Paul II years. After finding little to hope for from Benedict XVI's pontificate, he was astonished by "a moment of grace" in Francis's election in March 2013. Cornwell saw in this new pope the "possibility of new beginnings… for the entire Church, practicing, lapsing and lapsed." Hence this book, an exploration of this irruption of grace, what Cornwell describes as a welcome "interruption" of the course the Church had seemed set to follow.

The premise, of course, is discontinuity: Cornwell's love of Francis and antipathy toward John Paul II and Benedict XVI is explained, in part, by the writer's life story. Having moved from a pious working-class Irish childhood in London's East End into that most preconciliar of institutions, the minor seminary, Cornwell abandoned priestly training for agnostic freedom and life as a journalist at a national newspaper. After marrying a Catholic, his faith was rekindled, but "there was no return to the Church of certitudes, ultimate truths and righteousness." Catholicism became an object of his reporting. His first Catholic book was the result of a Vatican official inviting him to investigate the true story of how John Paul I met his end after just a few weeks in 1978. *A Thief in the Night*, which was published in 1989, debunked the lurid conspiracy theories surrounding Albino Luciani's untimely passing, yet still read like a whodunnit. It was a bestselling page-turner, and delighted Cornwell's Vatican handlers.



CHURCH, INTERRUPTED
Havoc & Hope: The Tender Revolt of Pope Francis

JOHN CORNWELL
Chronicle Prism
$27.95 | 304 pp.

With doors opened in Rome, Cornwell could have built a career out of books defending the Church. But his next Vatican-endorsed project, to refute claims that Pius XII was a Nazi sympathizer, led him in the opposite direction. Given privileged access to newly opened files on Eugenio Pacelli's beatification and diplomatic career, Cornwell says he stumbled upon "a circumstance that seemed to me even worse in its consequences, fully justifying the book's title, *Hitler's Pope*."

It was publishing gold: a gripping account of the pope's failure to speak out against the Nazis based on primary Vatican material hardly anyone else had then seen. *Hitler's Pope* roiled the Vatican—"I appeared to have fulfilled the role of 'devil's advocate,' which John Paul II abolished to expedite hordes of new saints," Cornwell recalls wryly—and triggered an avalanche of academic theses on Catholic "collaboration" with fascism and anti-Semitism. Some would say the response created a counter-mythology even more obfuscating than the official version. But Cornwell defends his record, claiming that these "rigorously academic" articles and books were an improvement on the hagiographies.

Breaking Faith (2001) and *The Pontiff in Winter* (2004) were devastating in their indictments of the corruption and failures of the John Paul II years. They make a powerful case for the prosecution, which revelations since 2005 have largely vindicated, but there was an edge to Cornwell's *j'accuse*, a barely disguised anger and contempt, which could partly be explained by more recent books, above all *Seminary Boy* (2006) and *The Dark Box: A Secret History of Confession* (2014). In these books Cornwell lays bare his suffering from the toxic cocktail of sex, sin, and abuse in the Church cul-

Pope Francis celebrates a Mass marking the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in St. Peter's Basilica, December 12, 2020.

CNS PHOTO/PAOLO GALOSI, POOL

ture he experienced as a young man. Hence the revealing aside at the close of *Church, Interrupted*. The John Paul II papacy, he says, had "encouraged an oppression aimed at reinstating the sin-cycle of former years."

In *Breaking Faith* Cornwell dreams of a pope who ceases to berate and condemn the sinfulness and wrongness of the world, yearning for a pastor who would instead "mend the breaking faith of our Church" and see in "the sinners, the marginalized, the dissidents, the discouraged" people in need of love and inclusion. Francis has fulfilled that hope. *Church, Interrupted* is the mirror opposite of *The Pontiff in Winter*. The savage indictments have given way to a touching admiration and affection. Where once he skewered the Polish pope, now he wields the skewer to defend the Argentine pope from his merciless critics.

Some of his sharpest lines are reserved for the anti-Francis lobby, whose convoluted, self-contradictory criticisms reveal their bad faith. "Francis could not win, could not be allowed to win, whatever he did or said, or did not do or say," Cornwell writes, in what could be a perfect description of Jesus and the Pharisees. Noting that many of Francis's critics are converts in search of a more militant affirmation of particular moral concerns, Cornwell observes the curious feature of conservative attacks, "that [Francis's] extension of moral concerns to embrace neglected issues meant a repudiation of others, even though there were deep parallel connections." Thus the pope's condemnation of capital punishment and nuclear weapons, for example, are used as evidence to claim (absurdly) that he is soft on abortion, which reminds Cornwell of the joke about the mother who buys her son two ties for his birthday. When he next sees her, he is wearing one. She says: "So you didn't like the other one?"

Church, Interrupted is made up of twenty-four brief chapters, each around the length of a *Commonweal* article, which take "soundings across [Francis's] key initiatives and reactions to events." It is a jerky format that plays to Cornwell's gifts of concision and forensic focus. Each short essay supplies enough background information for the reader to grasp the significance of Francis's "interruption," then hones in on key stories and anecdotes to illustrate the departure. It makes the book highly readable and accessible and, for an outsider curious about the Francis Effect, a fine introduction to the heart of what makes this pontificate so extraordinary.

Perhaps the best chapter is on gossip, which Francis constantly returns to as an evil to be extirpated from the Vatican—and with good reason. The atmosphere in Rome is "like a permanent Sunday afternoon," where "the physical structure creates a sense of hothouse separation, an enclosed palace filled mostly with celibates adrift from the real world." Cornwell is delighted that Francis is the first pope "to lambaste the malicious tongue-wagging of the Roman prelates," whose cynicism and failure in charity corrode the Church's mission.

Also sophisticated is the chapter on China, about which Francis has said almost nothing publicly, but which has been a major focus of his diplomacy. The secret accord with Beijing over the nomination of bishops has been heavily criticized from all sides—not least by the emeritus archbishop of Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, and the island's former British governor, Lord Christopher Patten—but Cornwell sees it as a necessary gamble, a bold attempt to end a situation in which the Chinese government has been dividing and ruling the Church.

Yet sometimes the format of the book constrains Cornwell to an efficient summary without much insight: on *Laudato si'*, for example, we get little beyond a précis of the encyclical. On women in the Church, Cornwell makes a good case for seeing Francis as an innovator introducing "striking changes" but, in explaining why the pope has not gone further toward ordaining women, falls back on the cliché that he is a man of his time and place. (If Cornwell thinks Francis has been timorous or retrograde he should say so, rather than patronizing supposed Argentine "machismo.") Sometimes the research is light: when Francis said that women were the "strawberries on the cake" of theology, it was to complain that there were so few in the International Theological Commission that they risked looking like a token presence.

These are peccadilloes of omission, but in one important case Cornwell misrepresents a major tenet of Francis's thinking. One of the key narratives of the book is what Cornwell describes as "a consistent feature of [Francis's] papacy: a capacity to hold opposites in tension, his many paradoxes giving rise to disruption." The theme appears in many of the chapters: thus, on China, "his agreement with the government over the nomination of bishops is another example of his capacity to hold opposites in tension and move forward by interruption." But the idea is never properly explained, and seems to obscure more than it reveals.

Of course, it is true that Francis, like all good leaders but to an exceptional degree, is able to navigate tensions and conflicts. And it is also true that Francis has developed Romano Guardini's theory of dynamic polarities into a method of governance and discernment. As Massimo Borghesi showed in *The Mind of Pope Francis*, and as the pope well explains in our book *Let Us Dream*, the idea of holding polarities in tension lies behind the emphasis on synodality that has so marked this pontificate.

But it is not only a matter of *containing* opposites in tension, still less a bid to interrupt or disrupt by doing so. The point of holding polarities in tension is to seek their resolution on a higher plane—by allowing the Holy Spirit to create a new way of seeing that reconciles the opposition by transcending it. In *Querida Amazonia*, and explicitly in *Let Us Dream*, Francis uses the metaphor of "overflow" to describe this action of the Holy Spirit, which in the context of the synods indicates the path to follow.

Not grasping this point leads Cornwell to mischaracterize *Amoris laetitia* as "written so as to lead to potentially opposite conclusions simultaneously," a classic instance, he says, of "Francis, once again, holding two opposites in tension without resolution." Yet whatever people may think of it, as far as Francis was concerned *Amoris* reflected the resolution of the 2015 synod: that the issue of communion for divorced couples is resolved in a different way of applying the law, one that is attentive to the operation of grace in the concrete lives of individuals. It is no longer, then, a matter of what Church law should or should not allow or disallow, but a matter for discernment by the couples and their pastors in the light of their unique histories—as Cornwell himself goes on to explain rather well.

This matters because it is all too easy to feed one of the anti-Francis fantasies, that the pope is strategically "ambiguous," operating a devious plan to turn everything upside down while appearing to do the opposite. (Ross Douthat's *To Change the Church*, for instance, turns on this myth). This is to misread what Jesuits call "apostolic discernment in common." One can hold differences in tension in search of illumination or guidance, as part of a process of discernment, as has happened in the synods over certain vexed questions. But it is a time-limited exercise. Either there will be resolution through "overflow," as in the family synod, or the differences will harden and polarize, as happened at the Amazon synod with respect to the question of ordaining married men. In the latter case, where Francis saw no "overflow," there could be no resolution or advance, at least in the short term.

If it is not Francis's polarities-in-tension that has "interrupted" what Cornwell had come to see as the Church's normal flow, what has? Where is the break? For as Cornwell says, it is not as if Francis has weakened, or diverged from, the Church's magisterium. The answer must lie in the pope's performance of the Gospel. But which part? For Cornwell it appears as what he calls the pope's "audacious prudence," his "consistent Christian counsel of prudence and clemency that recognizes human frailty: the way we are." It was the tender mercy of God—loving us in spite of us—that Cornwell ached to see in the successor of St Peter; and seeing it, he can hope again.

AUSTEN IVEREIGH *is a regular contributor to* Commonweal *and a Fellow in Contemporary Church History at the Jesuit-run Campion Hall at the University of Oxford. His most recent book is* Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better World *(Simon & Schuster).*

The Extremely Online Mind

KATIE DANIELS

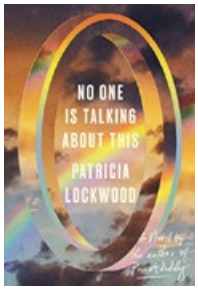
In February 2019, the poet Patricia Lockwood gave a lecture at the British Museum. She prefaced it by explaining that she had started keeping a diary of what it felt like to be "extremely online," a part of the internet's "snowy white disintegration, which felt also like the disintegration of my own mind." The 6,500-plus word speech that followed, titled simply "The Communal Mind," was written in the third person. As Lockwood said at the time, "It seemed fitting to write it in the third person because I no longer felt like myself."

Lockwood's new novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, is the result of her exploration of what it's like to experience life, neither online nor offline, but simply *with* the internet. Though she's previously published two books of poetry and a memoir, a novel is an apt form for this particular project. Internet life is endlessly weirder and more unbelievable than fiction, and it has a funny habit of seeping into our "real" lives in ways that feel, at this point, almost unsurprising: Pizzagate, QAnon, the Capitol riot, Tide Pods. No wonder Lockwood no longer felt like herself; who does?

No One Is Talking About This is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator who is ricocheted to internet and real-life fame when one of her posts ("*Can a dog be twins?*") goes viral. In high demand as an internet explainer, she gives lectures on "the portal," as she calls it, to audiences around the world. The novel is divided cleanly in two. In the first half, we're plunged into the continuous, looping scroll of the narrator's days—waking up and immediately checking the portal, trying to turn into "a single eye that scanned a single piece of writing." In the second, a family tragedy wrenches the narrator and reader alike back into the real world.

It would be a mistake to read this two-part division as a makeover-style "before and after," where the extremely online before is unequivocally bad and the extremely offline after is unequivocally good. Instead, Lockwood plays the two parts against each other to show that while online life is not complete when it's divorced from unironic physical existence, real life—and how we celebrate it, remember it, or grieve the loss of it—is now indelibly linked to our experience of the portal.

"I thought the novel ought to be written in the mode of the time, and the fragmentary and the autofictional are the modes of the time," Lockwood has said of *No One Is Talking About This*. But Lockwood was well placed to become the best (and funniest) guide to the internet long before writing autofiction about your troubled relationship with Twitter became popular. When her parents told her that they had no money to pay for college, Lockwood moved into an abandoned convent, where she found refuge on the internet, "a place of living, moving, breathing text, a book that continually wrote itself," as she writes in her memoir, *Priestdaddy*. (Her father is one of the few married Catholic priests in the United States, and she grew up in various rectories across the Midwest.) She met her husband, Jason, on a poetry message board; it's also where her nascent writing career took off. Even as she was sending poems to literary magazines, tweets of hers like ".@parisreview So is Paris any good or not" were going viral.



NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS
A Novel
PATRICIA LOCKWOOD
Riverhead Books
$25 | 224 pp.

Lockwood's internet is similar to the one that the narrator of *No One Is Talking About This* inhabits, both in its inherent weirdness and in her relationship with it, which the narrator describes as a "metastasis of the word *next*, the word *more*." She begins her days by submitting to "an avalanche of details" from the portal:

> Pictures of breakfasts in Patagonia, a girl applying her foundation with a hard-boiled egg, a shiba inu in Japan leaping from paw to paw to greet its owner, ghostly pale women posting pictures of their bruises—the world pressing closer and closer, the spiderweb of human connection grown so thick it was almost a shimmering and solid silk, and the day still not opening to her.

Lockwood has a poet's eye for detail, and a keen sense of the way those details, both mundane and profound, can overwhelm when relentlessly presented on the portal. There's no end to this avalanche, only ever-accumulating content. The more the narrator throws herself into the internet, the faster things speed up, shedding any sense of time, proportion, and context in the process. The first half of *No One Is Talking About This* doesn't have much of a plot; time for the narrator is meaningless, determined not by the rhythm of her day, but that of the portal's. "On a slow news day, we hung suspended from meathooks, dangling over the abyss. On a fast news day, it was like

To venture something on the internet is to court loss again and again.

we had swallowed all of NASCAR and were about to crash into the wall. Either way, it felt like something a dude named Randy was in charge of."

If the internet is the communal mind, to borrow the title of Lockwood's speech, then for the narrator, the 2016 election marks a turning point in our collective consciousness. Before, it was possible to remember the internet as it had first been, "in its childhood, a place of play." Now "it had become the place where we sounded like each other." Suddenly, everything in this once-familiar landscape is politicized in a whiplash way that even (or especially) the extremely online narrator struggles to follow. Her more-or-less sincere attempts at political engagement have an edge of social satire: she acquires class consciousness (it makes "something in the back of her head hurt") and attends a therapy session to learn how to hate the police (she concludes that her therapist is more radical than she is). The closest thing to real-life political engagement is when the narrator's husband decides to protest the election by getting a face tattoo ("the words STOP IT in very small letters right near his hairline, where they could hardly be seen").

The fevered post-election internet landscape, coupled with the narrator's frequent travels for speaking engagements, contribute to the paradox at the heart of the first half of *No One Is Talking About This*: even as she is relied upon to interpret the internet to outsiders, the portal is growing unfamiliar to her. At one point the narrator describes her ritual for untethering herself from the portal after a long day spent scrolling: "google beautiful brown pictures of roast chickens—maybe because that's what women used to do with their days." It's funny, even as it reveals the degree of alienation the narrator feels from her actual life. Googling, not cooking, dinner will have to suffice.

This frictionless existence comes to an abrupt halt when she receives a text from her mother during one of her trips abroad. The narrator's younger sister is pregnant and something has gone wrong. The baby's head is growing at an accelerated rate, and she is diagnosed in utero with Proteus syndrome, a rare genetic condition. She is expected to survive for only a short time, if she survives at all. Pregnancy is now life-threatening for the sister; a new law in her state makes it a felony to induce labor before thirty-seven weeks. For the narrator, politics is suddenly heart-stoppingly personal. Miraculously, both the baby and the sister live—but the narrator goes silent on the portal, recognizing that this is too big, too messy, too human to share, even on platforms designed for oversharing. "You averted your eyes from the ones who were in mad grief," she thinks, "whose mouths were open like caves with ancient paintings inside."

At the same time, the portal is inadequate for expressing the joy and delight the narrator and her family take in the baby. "It was a marvel how cleanly and completely this lifted her out of the stream of regular life," she thinks of her niece. "She wanted to stop people on the street and say, 'Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!'" Time for the narrator is still fragmented and dislocated—only now its pieces are the necessary physical tasks of caring for her sister and the baby.

But the communal mind is still there, "present as a living thing." Disconnected from the portal, the narrator and even her less-online family continue to use its language to try to make sense of the complicated nature of their situation, resorting at times to darkly ironic humor. ("No one is talking about this" can be read either as a rallying cry for appreciating real life or as a Twitter in-joke, a phrase people use, either unironically or with mock outrage, to call attention to something people are usually already talking about.) The baby is an "open cloud," and when their family speaks to her, their voices are "contentless entirely except for love."

Patricia Lockwood

Her niece's diagnosis also forces the narrator to confront the difference between loss online and loss in the real world. The internet conditions you to the ephemeral, especially for people like the narrator who make a living by tweeting. To venture something on the portal is to court loss again and again; your tweet or post, with rare exception, will most likely be buried by an anonymous algorithm, gone without anyone taking notice. So what does it mean, the narrator wonders, that she's famous for a tweet that teenagers will remember "instead of the date of the Treaty of Versailles," but no one will know about the most real thing in her life, her niece?

Our rituals of remembering have never been perfect. Early in the novel, the narrator visits an ancient cairn on one of her trips. "They said all you needed to be remembered was one small stone piled on another," she thinks to herself. "Wasn't that what we were doing in the portal, small stone on small stone on small stone?" No matter the form, whether a stone, a tweet, or even a novel, what the narrator calls "the faint voltage of *I am*" still hums.

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GREP HOAX

St. Francis of Assisi Church, Chicago, 1948

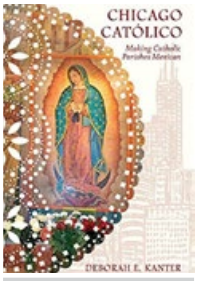
COURTESY OF CLARETIAN MISSIONARIES ARCHIVES USA–CANADA

Making It Their Own

MILTON JAVIER BRAVO

Catholics of Latino origin have often been invisible in American society, even to other American Catholics. Spanish-speaking Catholics have resided in this land since before the United States was founded, and many neighborhoods and parishes have been shaped and reshaped by their contributions. Yet they have been overlooked in most historical accounts of significant events in U.S. history. *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican*—the fruit of eighteen years' worth of research by Deborah E. Kanter—helps correct this omission by documenting the contribution of Mexican-American Catholics to one great American city.

Catholic immigrants from Mexico found a place of refuge in their new Chicago parishes, which provided not only the sacraments but also spaces for social and community functions. These were the anchors of their new neighborhoods: Near West Side, South Chicago, Pilsen. The parishes had once been home to other immigrant communities—Polish, Irish, and German Catholics who had arrived in this country decades earlier and had since been assimilated into mainstream American culture.



CHICAGO CATÓLICO
Making Catholic Parishes Mexican

DEBORAH E. KANTER
University of Illinois Press
$24.95 | 232 pp.

Chicago Católico is grounded in parish documents—including bulletins, annual reports, letters, parochial records, and parish newspapers—but it also makes good use of recorded oral histories. Kanter delves into the everyday details of how Mexican immigrants and their children made parishes their own. It relates the experiences of women who organized *las guadalupanas*, religious teachers and school children, soldiers fighting abroad while remaining closely connected to home through the mail. We read about Corporal Teófilo Arevalo opening a package from home as his unit made its way to Germany during World War II. Inside was a copy of the *St. Francis Crier*, a twelve-page newspaper published by his parish back in Chicago. It brought him news of friends serving throughout the world: Pfc. Manuel Martinez, Cpl. Sixto Zaragoza, and Pvt. Joseph Reyes.

Kanter's book is divided into five chapters that follow Mexican migration and integration from the 1920s through the 1970s. She focuses on several Chicago parishes, tracking their transformation through this fifty-year period. One chapter is devoted to migration between 1920 and 1939, which often took place in stages—from Mexico to Texas and finally to Chicago. The reader follows Elidia Barroso and her family as they cross the U.S.-Mexico border in 1916. Crossing the border was then a simple process for the educated middle-class traveler. Elidia and her family wouldn't have encountered Customs and Border Patrol (an agency created in 1924) at militarized entry points. As Kanter writes, even in the 1930s, "Mexicans, if they could pass the literacy test and pay the eight-dollar head tax, easily entered the United States." Today, of course, they would need a visa or an asylum claim, and both of these have become increasingly hard to come by in recent years.

When Mexicans first arrived in Texas, they found parishes like San Fernando Cathedral, which welcomed and promoted Mexican cultural and religious practices. In many ways, border states like Texas still felt a lot like home. But economic pressure forced Mexican immigrants to move north into parts of the country that were less culturally congenial, but offered jobs with higher pay or more security. The labor shortages in the Midwest after World War I made it easy for *enganchistas* (contractors) to recruit workers from Texas to Chicago.

Mexican migrants worked on the railroads from Kansas to New York and on farms from Nebraska to Michigan. During that period, Illinois became the fourth most common destination for Mexican nationals. Kanter braids together the story of Mexican migration with the changing ministry of the Spanish-speaking Claretian order. Countless Mexican families like Elidia Barroso's had first encountered Claretian missionaries in Texas, only to encounter them again in Chicago. The Claretians followed the migrants wherever they went, helping integrate Mexican and Mexican-American families into parishes and communities across the country.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Des Plaines, Illinois

This wasn't always easy. Noting the growth of the Mexican population in Chicago, the Claretians offered their services to Archbishop George Mundelein in 1918. Initially, there was no response. Finally, in 1924, they took over Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in South Chicago, and in 1927 became St. Francis of Assisi's administrators. The same year, an Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine was added to the sanctuary of St. Francis—physical proof that Mexican Catholicism was now an important part of the parish. The newcomers were not just temporary visitors; they were at home. In the decades to come St. Francis of Assisi would become known as "La Catedral Mexicana," a transformation due in no small part to the attention and perseverance of the Claretians.

In the 1950s, St. Francis of Assisi not only provided the Mass in Spanish and a place where Mexican immigrants could practice their popular devotions together; it also served as a base for important social services, and as a hub for the growing Mexican community's larger culture. Near the church were Mexican restaurants, bookstores, grocery stores, a theater, the parochial school, and the recently established Catholic Youth Organization gym.

In Chicago, Mexican families found what Kanter calls an "immigrant-ready infrastructure" that provided jobs, housing, and schools (both public and parochial). One neighborhood in Chicago, Near West Side, emerged as one of the two main nodes of activity for the Mexican immigrant community. In the mid-nineteenth century, the same neighborhood had welcomed German, Irish, and Italian immigrants. It was close to the factories and downtown hotels where many of them worked. The Illinois Central Freight House was less than a mile away.

The transition within such neighborhoods from European to Mexican immigrant communities took the better part of a century; in some respects, it is still underway. Kanter cites John T. McGreevy's observation that the long, slow assimilation of these communities into American society—both facilitated and inhibited by Catholic institutions—is "the central drama of the twentieth century U.S. Catholic history." But even as Mexican immigrants and their descendants have been integrated into American culture, the American parishes they joined have assimilated Mexican piety and culture. By documenting the history of this mutual influence over the course of a century in one Midwestern city, Kanter's book reminds us that Mexican Catholicism has been an important part of U.S. Catholicism for much longer than many people realize, and not only near the border.

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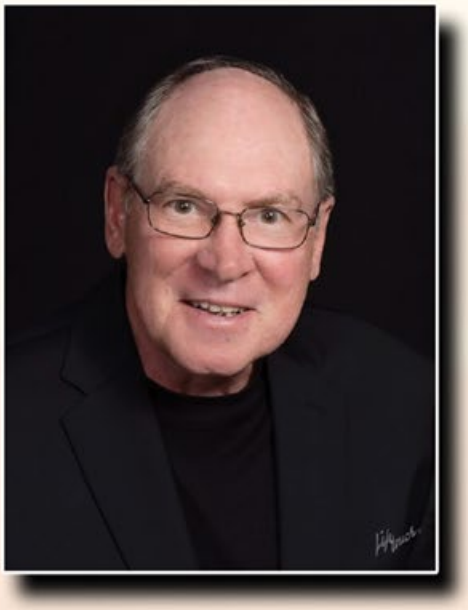
CNS PHOTO/KAREN CALLAWAY, CHICAGO CATHOLIC



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ANTHONY DOMESTICO

An Uncommon Tendency

The career of Mary-Kay Wilmers

In January, Mary-Kay Wilmers announced that she would be stepping down from her position as editor of the *London Review of Books*. Wilmers became editor in 1988, nine years after she helped found the magazine with Karl Miller and Susannah Clapp. If it's hard to imagine a *LRB* without Wilmers at the helm, that's because such a thing hasn't ever really existed.

In the magazine's inaugural 1979 issue, Miller lamented the then-current literary state of affairs: "For reasons that can't all be separated from the facts of a national decline, criticism, and the literature it serves, have suffered a loss of confidence." Yet, Miller continued, there was reason to hope: "It is also true that gifted performers have arrived, and survived. New papers are starting, and old ones are resuming. There is no law of history which says that literature cannot break the spell of its dependence on the economy and on the state of the nation." It's hard to say whether the state of the nation is better or worse than it was in 1979. Pick your poison: union-busting Thatcher or bloviating Boris; the threat of privatization and closing factories or their accomplished fact. But pick up any issue of the *LRB* and you'll find that, thanks in large part to the editorial direction of Wilmers, British criticism is thriving.

There aren't many magazines worth reading cover to cover; the *LRB* is one. Just in the past few issues, Perry Anderson published a three-part, 45,000-word essay on the European Union that was—somehow, impossibly—interesting; Patricia Lockwood wrote a genius-level piece on Nabokov's life and work ("A young aristocrat, 75 per cent composed of foraged mushrooms, asks his pristine parents what an erection is, and they tell him that Tolstoy has died. Who *can't* relate?"); and Christian Lorentzen opened a political piece like this: "The state of Delaware has given the world three gifts: chemicals, debt and Joe Biden. Each

MARK KERRISON/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

Mary-Kay Wilmers

promises great things but may deliver undesirable side effects." Some of my favorite essayists—Lockwood, Andrew O'Hagan, Michael Wood—regularly write for the magazine, or the "paper," as its editors refer to it. Yet my favorite piece from the last year was an essay by Tom Crewe on, of all things, the history of British summer holidays.

Writing in 1926, T. S. Eliot said that a literary review should ideally have a "tendency" rather than a "programme": "Editor and collaborators may freely express their individual opinions and ideas, so long as there is a residue of common tendency, in the light of which many occasional contributors, otherwise irrelevant or even antagonistic, may take their place and counteract any narrow sectarianism." The common tendency of the *LRB* is, in fact, its rejection of narrow sectarianism. The pieces run long, and this space allows for, even demands, that ideas—about art, about political economy, about history—be contested and reconsidered in the writing itself. Lockwood, for instance, began an essay, "I was hired as an assassin. You don't bring in a 37-year-old woman to review John Updike in the year of our Lord 2019 unless you're hoping to see blood on the ceiling." Over its almost seven thousand words, Lockwood's piece shifts between disdain and celebration before ultimately landing on a decidedly un-assassin-like take: "When he is in flight you are glad to be alive. When he comes down wrong—which is often—you feel the sickening turn of an ankle, a real nausea." The essay turns and turns and turns again, in exactly the way an essay should. It's the kind of piece Wilmers continually gets into the *LRB*'s pages.

After the announcement of Wilmers's retirement, Andrew O'Hagan described her editorial approach:

> It's not always easy to define an editor's style, but Mary-Kay definitely has one. It relies on an enduring respect for the possibilities of ambivalence—"most writers believe too much in what they believe," she once told me—as well as what John Lanchester once identified as a "Russian horror of clarity." It's not that she doesn't like clear prose, it's just that she prefers it when writers don't use that prose to know, in advance of knowing, what they think about everything, or to preach to the readers, or to make a show of their own honour.

Ambivalence and the possibility of surprise, both to the reader and to the writer: this is what Wilmers demands from her writers and this is what the *LRB* consistently gives to its readers. It's also what Wilmers has offered in her own two books, *Human Relations and Other Difficulties* (Picador) and *The Eitingons: A Twentieth-Century Story* (Faber & Faber). *Human Relations and Other Difficulties* brings together a number of pieces that Wilmers published in the *LRB* and other venues; *The Eitingons*, a history-memoir hybrid, hunts through the archives after three historical figures, all related to the author: Leonid Eitingon, a KGB agent who helped plan the assassination of Trotsky; Max Eitingon, a friend of Freud who may have been involved in the killing of a White Russian in the 1930s; and Motty Eitingon, one of the most successful fur traders in the world, until he wasn't.

In a preface to *Human Relations and Other Difficulties*, John Lanchester praises Wilmers's essays by saying that "they don't smell of writing.... The end product is clear as vodka, a clarity which is all the more striking since Mary-Kay is often in two minds about things." Again, note the emphasis on ambivalence: not feeling nothing but feeling in tension with itself. Wilmers is a liberal who is skeptical of the Left; she has championed female writers and looked critically at feminism. She values argumentative openness—when writing on Leonid, Max, and Motty, almost every paragraph has a "but" or "still" or "yet"—yet she expresses this habit of mind with great decisiveness.

To sample one remarkable paragraph from her remarkable familial memoir, here she describes looking at a photograph of the fur dealer, Motty Eitingon:

> He's smiling up at someone, the smile revealing a very good, large set of teeth and causing the eyes to pucker: it's the position of the lower lids, not the upper ones, that the smile seems to have changed. There is what must have been a trademark gleam in the eyes, something very endearing and… charming. Motty would have been in his late fifties and there isn't much hair to speak of. The face is in general big, the features also big, especially the nose and ears, and the overall effect is fairly irresistible. I've looked at this photo now and then, and come to feel that despite the frankness of expression and the openness of the face itself, this is a portrait of an unknowable person. I don't mean that something inconceivable was hidden away behind the affability—a long career in espionage, for instance, or murder, or adultery. Only that charm is a way for a person not to be there. It stands in for character, and once character has been off duty for a few years, it may abscond completely and let someone else sign the cheques or deal with the person at the door.

Ambivalence and the possibility of surprise: this is what Wilmers demands from her writers and this is what the LRB *gives to its readers.*

What a marvel of descriptive and analytic precision—not the upper lids but the lower ones; an unknowable person, but not in the way you might expect—all leading to the best account of the chilly inhumanity of a certain kind of charm I've ever read. To be a great writer is to discover the rhythm that is your own; to be a great editor is to help in this discovery. For more than forty years, Mary-Kay Wilmers has excelled at both tasks.

ANTHONY DOMESTICO *is associate professor of literature at Purchase College, and a frequent contributor to* Commonweal. *His book* Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period *is available from Johns Hopkins University Press.*

EL NIÑO

Diane Scharper

On the night my mother died,
El Niño drifting like a mist above
Our street with fine silk light billowing
Out, beckoning to the winter
Darkness. One moment there was
Nothing, only dry aspen leaves
Quivering and thin clouds
Floating like tears over the sky. In the next,
My mother was looking at me for the last
Time—her eyes as gray blue
As rain. Her breath coming in little
Gasps fluttered among the leaves of the euonymus bush.
Then the soft face of El Niño called
Her, and she turned to follow Him leaving us behind
Like pebbles in the moonlight.
When she was gone, I looked for her.
I continually look for her. This was her last act of love.

DIANE SCHARPER *is the author of* Radiant: Prayer/Poems *(Cathedral Foundation Press)*.

SANTIAGO RAMOS

Why They Loved Him

Diego Maradona & the hazards of genius

Diego Armando Maradona was loved by millions of people. The global outpouring of grief that followed his death in November made this clear even to those who had never paid him, or his sport, much attention. The Argentine soccer legend—who died at age sixty, from heart failure—was of course adored in his homeland. He was loved in Naples, whose team he led to its first-ever national championships, in the teeth of scorn from the southern city's wealthier northern rivals. (During matches, fans from the other team would taunt the *napoletani* with banners reading "WASH YOURSELVES" and "CHOLERA SUFFERERS." Maradona, who was born in Villa Fiorito, a slum near Buenos Aires, found it easy to side with the underdogs from Naples.) Maradona was also loved by anyone who loves the game, even by South Americans from other countries who might root against Argentina—such as my normally talkative seventy-year-old uncle, who clammed up, unable to express his awe, when conversation took us back to Maradona's triumph in the 1986 World Cup, a performance that had to be seen to be believed.

Maradona's fans had a slogan: *Not for what you did with your life, but what you did with ours*. He made many mistakes with his life. There are reports of sordid incidents involving drugs and prostitutes. He was accused twice of domestic abuse. He delayed admitting to the paternity of several of his children. But his fans focused on his achievements. Those are what made people call Maradona a hero, even a genius. His greatest goal, scored in the 1986 World Cup, produced a memorable call from the announcer: "*Genio, genio, genio, ta-ta-ta, goooool!*"

Asif Kapadia's 2019 documentary, *Diego Maradona*, which focuses on the player's time at SSC Napoli, includes a fascinating scene in which Maradona describes his gift. The transition to the Italian league from the Argentine and Spanish leagues where he had played before posed new challenges for the young Maradona. "Italian football was played at a different rhythm and the football was rougher. I had to adapt and learn to play at a different speed. I sped up my timing in order to get into [the] play. If I went one way abandoning my technique, so that I could run faster, I would've been useless. And if I went top-speed…my technique wouldn't have worked. I had to find a balance, which wasn't easy." More than any physical advantage, this athletic intelligence was essential to Maradona's talent. As Dutch legend Johan Cruyff once said, "Football is a game you play with your brain."

Under Maradona's leadership, SSC Napoli won two national championships and a European title. He was captain of a strong Argentine national squad in the 1986 World Cup, where he scored five goals and made five assists as he led the team to victory against Germany in the final. Two of those goals—against England in the quarterfinals and Belgium in the semifinals—are considered among the most beautiful in the history of the sport. Four years later, while still recovering from an ankle injury, he led Argentina to another World Cup final, which they lost to Germany. But Maradona's legacy was secure. Moreover, he achieved all this in a time when star players routinely suffered from kicks, scrapes, and other dirty play, before referees became more attentive and well before instant replay became a regular part of the sport. "Genius," Wittgenstein wrote, "is talent exercised with courage." Maradona was, in this sense at least, a genius.

To call someone a genius is to elevate and possibly endanger that person. It is to raise him above the community that nurtured his genius; the danger lies in alienating him from that

Diego Maradona celebrates after scoring the second goal against England during a World Cup quarterfinal match on June 22, 1986.

BOB THOMAS/GETTY

community. In a recent essay for the *Point*, philosopher Agnes Callard argues that we classify people as geniuses "to serve our own fantasies of independence." The genius is allowed to exist in a special realm above the common folk, while his faults are recast as "charming idiosyncrasies." "Is there really any person," Callard asks, "whose mind is so alien that she flourishes by being set 'free' from the normative expectations that constitute community membership for the rest of us?"

Certainly, Maradona suffered from being "freed" from such expectations. Kapadia's film documents the managed debauchery during Maradona's time in Naples, enabled by powerful people who supplied him with illegal comforts and sheltered him from police scrutiny. But Maradona's privileges evaporated after he played as a member of Argentina's national team against Italy in the 1990 World Cup semifinal. That World Cup was hosted by Italy, and for the national team to lose on home soil was heartbreaking enough. But to lose at home against *Maradona* and in the Naples stadium—that was too much for certain powerful people to handle. (It didn't help that Maradona roiled ancient antipathies before the match by asking the *napoletani* to root for Argentina, saying that northern Italy rejects them anyway.) After the 1990 World Cup, the powers that be stopped looking the other way when Maradona broke the rules. His fall from grace soon followed: an arrest for drug possession, a trial, rehab, health problems.

One community that could have helped him was the Catholic Church. Maradona's faith was like a song whose meaning he remembered even if he forgot some of the words. You saw it when he clutched his rosary while pacing the sidelines as the Argentina coach in the 2010 World Cup, or whenever he publicly thanked God for the unmerited gift of his talent. It was there when he denounced the gilded trappings of FIFA, and when he challenged the pope to do more to help the poor: "Sell the ceilings! Do something!" But even here, his reputation as a genius seemed to prevent Maradona from simply *belonging*, in a humble and healthy way, to a community. It's not easy to be devout when one is the object of so much quasi-religious devotion. Many fans still call Maradona "god."

Maradona was the brilliant, troubled product of the world as we know it, where illusion and talent are all too often an inseparable pair.

One of Maradona's finest hours was also one where he broke the rules. But he did so for the sake of the community closest to him: his country. Argentina's victory over England in the 1986 World Cup is considered one of the great matches in soccer history. This is due in part to the magic of Maradona's second goal. Maradona received the ball at midfield, then slalomed past half the English team in a calibrated, prancing dribble. He rounded the goalkeeper and scored just as he was losing his balance, falling to his right side. Then he got up and sprinted toward the stands, where he celebrated with his people. But this triumph will forever be associated with Maradona's notorious "Hand of God" goal that came four minutes earlier. The ball spiked up into the air, and as it came back down, both Peter Shilton, the English goalkeeper, and Maradona jumped up to meet it. Shilton was allowed to use his hands; Maradona was not. Yet Maradona punched the ball into the net, above Shilton's raised fist. The referees saw nothing.

Historical context makes this story something more than an alarming instance of cheating (which it was). The match took place four years after the 1982 Falklands War, which pitted Argentina against the United Kingdom. More than six hundred Argentine soldiers and two hundred British soldiers died. Argentina lost the war, and the 1986 match became a chance to seek vindication. Maradona was wryly appealing to divine justice when he attributed his illegal goal to "the hand of God." It was, of course, a theological error to imply that God took sides in a military dispute over a south Atlantic archipelago. But for most Argentines, victory over England was a moment of catharsis. As ESPN commentator Gabriele Marcotti has noted, apart from the Falklands conflict, victory over England *by a South American nation* also meant the victory of an upstart nation over the country that invented soccer—the same country whose team refused to travel to South America for the first World Cup in 1930. In this match, Maradona and Argentina had defeated an empire. Maradona's support for left-wing politicians and his Che Guevara tattoo testify to this anti-imperialist spirit.

Maradona had the self-awareness to acknowledge the costs of his transgressions. He regretted his drug use, weeping during a 2004 post-rehab television interview. In 2001, he spoke before fans in the Bombonera, the Boca Juniors stadium, during an event honoring his career. "I made mistakes and I paid for them," he said. Then he added this: "*la pelota no se mancha*" ("the ball does not get dirty"). The game itself and the joy it creates are innocent. It is possible Maradona never spoke a more beautiful sentence.

After his death, SSC Napoli announced that it would rename its stadium after Maradona—the quarrel between player and city was by now long forgotten. In Argentina, Maradona's wake was held in the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace. Ignoring any pandemic precautions, thousands of people crammed together and even climbed the perimeter fence to pay their respects. Police broke up a few disturbances in the crowd.

All this adulation helped people forget that Maradona's last years had been difficult. "It is characteristic of genius to warrant the hyper-tolerance—and utter isolation—of being put on a pedestal and surrounded with a supportive entourage of yes-men," Callard writes. In recent years, unflattering iPhone videos of an intoxicated and helpless Maradona, flanked by admirers, spread through social media. Once, ESPN attempted to interview him after a match in Culiacán, Mexico, where he had been hired to coach Dorados de Sinaloa, a second-division team. Confused and stuttering, after thirty seconds Maradona gave up and turned away from the ESPN reporters, without managing to utter a single intelligible word. At least the Netflix docuseries about his time in Culiacán, *Maradona in Mexico*, offers a balanced picture of the man: his aching, aging physique; his old-man vanity; his care for his players; his undying passion for the game.

Maradona was one of a kind, but he embodied a familiar modern tension. The desire to *actualize* ourselves as individuals sits uneasily alongside the longing for membership in a stable community. Maradona never forgot his origins in Villa Fiorito; he had the rootedness and charisma of someone who, in the Middle Ages, might have led a peasant revolt. But he was also a globetrotting cosmopolitan who became a local hero on three different continents. We might imagine a world where people can reconcile these contradictions and develop their talents in peace, free from the illusions of "genius." But that world doesn't exist yet. Maradona was the brilliant, troubled product of the world as we know it, where illusion and talent are all too often an inseparable pair.

SANTIAGO RAMOS *is a freelance journalist and a philosophy professor at Rockhurst University. He was the 2020 John Garvey Writing Fellow at* Commonweal.

the weal

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Upcoming Events:

Mar 31, 6:30pm CT (7:30pm ET)

Stations of the Cross
with Chris de Silva

This Holy Week, join Chris de Silva and the weal for a spiritual pilgrimage as we prepare for the Easter Triduum through a virtual Stations of the Cross.

Apr 21, 5:30pm CT (6:30pm ET)

Resistance Art with
Fr. Eddie De Leon, CMF

A discussion with Fr. Eddie De Leon about the expression of resistance in art

Apr 27, 5:30pm CT (6:30pm ET)

The 2020 Presidential Election
& the First 100 Days

A panel discussion with Matthew Sitman, Miguel Díaz, Heidi Schlumpf, and John White

May 6, 5:30pm CT (6:30pm ET)

An Evening with Dan Horan, OFM

A discussion with Dan Horan, OFM on seeing current events through the lens of Catholic spirituality

For questions about the Weal and registration information, please contact us at:

theweal@commonwealmagazine.org

BESIDES

Peter Cooley

there's never-heaven always in my hand
reminding me my fingers have no grip
on Heaven ever, coming through the trees—

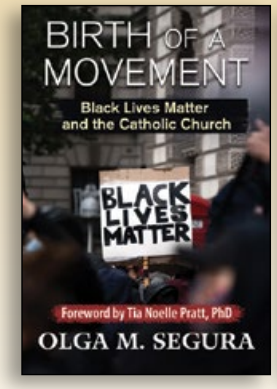
that kind of fastening the morning holds
on everything the sun allows to pass
under surveillance, possession, loss, loss, loss...

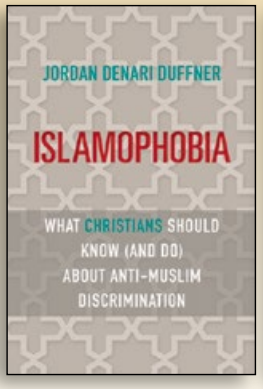
Once I thought I was here to name the stars.
Wasn't that yesterday? But now I know
in this blue moment I'll find everything.

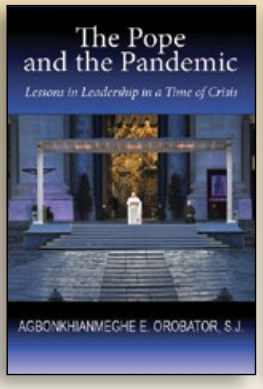
I could invent the jaybird in my yard
but he is singing. That's how I fly from here—
already he is more than I can bear,

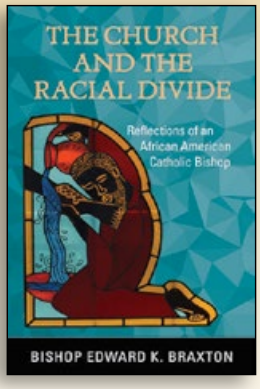
his music tearing me up inside till I die,
rise, die, rise, die. This is just metaphor.
And this: I'm resurrected every day.

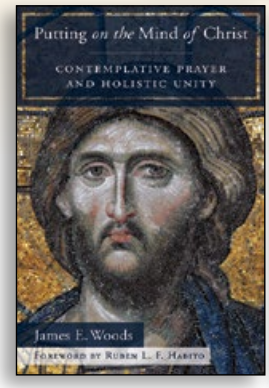
PETER COOLEY *is Professor Emeritus of English and Director of Creative Writing at Tulane University where he taught from 1975 to 2018. His eleventh book of poetry,* The One Certain Thing, *was published by Carnegie Mellon in February. He is poetry editor of* Christianity and Literature *and was Louisiana Poet Laureate from 2015 to 2017.*

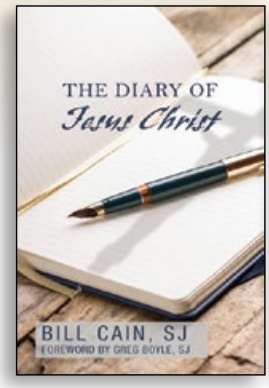


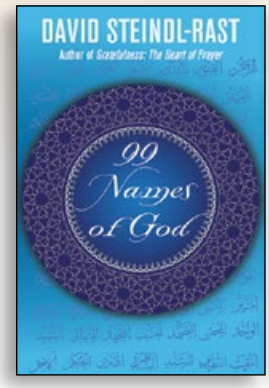


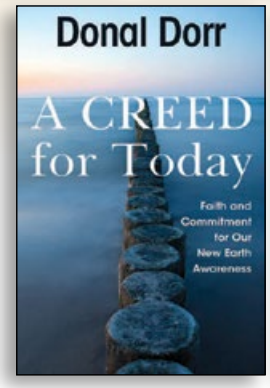


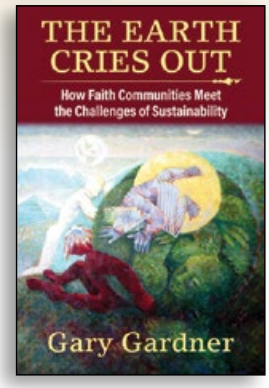












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ROBERTO J. DE LA NOVAL

What We've Been Missing

A new mood pervades every socially distanced conversation now that America's COVID-19 vaccine rollout is underway. And, I should add, the delays in distribution have done nothing to dampen this mood. For whatever the logistical and moral failures of our country's sundry vaccination programs, it is undeniable that hope has entered the scene in a new and palpable way. There is an end in sight to this nightmare; that is reason enough for joy. It is a joy of resurrection, of new life in the flesh.

We anticipate a return to life as we knew it, to communion with one another in all its varied forms. We eagerly await the return of the old, happy bustle, restaurants and bars and coffee houses full and humming with chatter and clatter. We also look forward to what we cannot expect: those chance meetings that constitute the thrill of the everyday. The totality of human community—which must include those nameless faces, those passing mysteries who exist in the background of our quotidian routines—is just months, not years, away. Soon, I will be able to smile at a stranger with more than just my eyes.

"Peace be with you," the resurrected Christ said to his disciples when he appeared in their midst, behind doors they had shut in fright. To say the same words to one another, on an ordinary Sunday, would mean resurrection; to sing with one another even more so. A few Sundays ago, the celebrant at Mass announced that the strictures on public singing had been relaxed and people should once again join in the chants of the major Mass parts. Barely anyone did. Fear has too much choked the sanctuary, and we long to hear the words, "Fear not," so that we may clothe Christ's sacramental flesh, exposed and present among us, with a fitting raiment of praise.

The coronavirus has shattered the rhythm of our social clocks, halting that most human of activities: marking time with ritual and celebration. Some of the mystics among us report that they have been living in an "eternal now" since the pandemic began. But for those of us who have yet to attain these spiritual heights, the recurrence of the same, again and again, has made of each day an inescapable limbo. Both our secular and religious calendars remind us that time is not meant to be empty and directionless, that instead it should pulse with a melody spiraling toward the future. The pandemic muffled that music. Soon we will be able to hear it again.

Many of us spent Thanksgiving and Christmas alone, engaging friends and family only through a screen. And we were the fortunate ones: hundreds of thousands of Americans had died by the time the holidays arrived. Because of the virus's high transmissibility, their loved ones were barred from their right to mourn in bodily proximity to the departed. Yet we hope that, after just a few more months, our pent-up tears can flow again as family members safely meet to embrace one another and honor their beloved dead.

This year has taught us in an unprecedented way what it means to look for the resurrection of the flesh. "In my flesh I shall see God," Job proclaimed from his own isolation and pain; and so it was that in human flesh God was seen, appearing again in the body after the horror of crucifixion and absence. The Christian doctrine of the Resurrection—so repugnant to Greek sensibilities when St. Paul first preached it at the Areopagus—has become all too comprehensible after the collective trauma we have suffered: *of course* Christ returned to his friends and his mother in his flesh, however transfigured; of course doubting Thomas wanted to *feel* his way into the Resurrection. "I touch, therefore I am" will be our new refrain when we are at last raised up from the pit.

I suspect that even after COVID-19 recedes into memory—God hasten the day—we will not soon forget the joy of resurrection. Perhaps the recollection of it will make us more patient with the flesh of others. Perhaps it will grant us more compassion for our own flesh too. And perhaps we will comprehend more intimately why the flesh is our eternal destiny, and why God has forever made it his own.

ROBERTO J. DE LA NOVAL *teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

IANDAGNALL COMPUTING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1571-1610

Commonweal CONVERSATIONS

Monday, October 18, 2021

Pier Sixty at Chelsea Piers | New York City
6:30pm | Reception with Featured Guests
7:30pm | Dinner & Award Presentation

Our Featured Guests:

Dan Barry
Paul Baumann
Matthew Boudway
Rand Richards Cooper
Dylan Corbett
Katie Daniels
Neomi De Anda
Anthony Domestico
Paul Elie
Massimo Faggioli
Rita Ferrone
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David Gibson
Patricia Hampl
Brett C. Hoover
Natalia Imperatori-Lee
Patrick Jordan
Cathleen Kaveny
Paul Lakeland
James Martin, SJ
Fr. Bryan Massingale
Timothy Matovina
Matt Mazewski
Alice McDermott
Paul Moses
Regina Munch
Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández
Mollie Wilson O'Reilly
Griffin Oleynick
Hosffman Ospino
Michael Peppard
Dominic Preziosi
Kirstin Valdez Quade
Valerie Sayers
Matthew Sitman
Peter Steinfels
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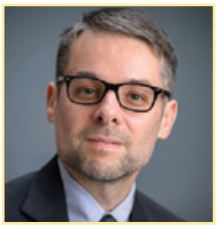
Plus more to be announced soon!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KEYNOTE PRESENTERS

Thursday, September 9, 2021 – 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. (EDT)

Father Dan Horan, OFM, Chicago Theological Union

"The Future Church is Now: Exploring the 'Joys and Hopes, Griefs and Anxieties' of Young Adult Catholics Today"

Friday, September 10, 2021 – 9:00 - 10:30 a.m. (EDT)

Kerry A. Robinson, Leadership Roundtable

"Co-Responsibility: Toward a New Culture of Leadership in the Church"

Friday, September 10, 2021 – 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. (EDT)

Christine Gebhardt, PhD, University of Notre Dame

"Intergenerational Dialogue in, and Moral Development with, Young Adults"

Friday, September 10, 2021 – 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. (EDT)

Kaya Oakes, University of California, Berkeley

"Beyond the Boundaries: How the Pandemic and Online Life are Changing Our Spiritual Lives"

Saturday, September 11, 2021 – 9:00 - 10:30 a.m. (EDT)

Sebastian Gomes, America Magazine

"I Can't Believe It! How Contemporary Catholicism Repels and Attracts"

Additional workshops include:

- Evangelization to Young Adults
- What the Top Campuses Know about Reaching College Students
- The State of Religion and Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertain Times
- New Education Models for Reaching College-Age Students
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