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Commonweal

JULY/AUGUST 2023

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LETTERS

Higher education, nuns and abuse, Baptism, AI

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?

Kudos to Ryan M. Brown for his incisive review of Will Bunch's eulogy to American higher education, *After the Ivory Tower Falls* ("Higher Ed Laid Low," May 2023).

Isn't it jarring how so recently, from post–World War II through the sixties, the United States largely insisted college education should be accessible, affordable, and an integral part of our national well-being? Then, inexorably, without the collective will to protect higher learning, the gentrification of academic achievement ensued, arguably leaving us bereft as a society.

Perhaps this was a mere function of market forces; the number crunchers turned learning from a highly venerated public good into a vehicle for gaining wealth—largely for themselves and various outside forces (e.g., business interests, defense firms, big pharma, etc.). All of this was shrouded in a thick dose of myth: chiefly, that college, while surely pricier, was still a robust, wholesome meritocracy rewarding the best and brightest students and protecting the American standard of living well into the future. But the myth avoided admitting, in Bunch's language, that many were just "left out."

R. Jay Allain
Orleans, Mass.

NOT ALL NUNS

My heart breaks for the children of abuse at the hands of any teacher, in this case nuns ("No One Listened," June 2023). Helene Stapinski reports on her personal experience of nuns "slapping children across the face, hitting us with big wooden paddles, and making us kneel as a group for extended periods." Examples of similar abuse by public-school teachers and principals are reported as well. A principal of a public school in, of all places, Palo Alto whipped my own sister! However, Stapinski and so many others seem to extend their experiences to all nuns teaching in the "1940s, '50s, '60s, or even '70s." This type of stereotyping taints the lives of countless women who have dedicated their lives to the common good. I was removed from the aforementioned Palo Alto public school and put into the Catholic school and experienced the most loving, intelligent women—nuns. Again, I attended an all-girls Catholic high school and was guided by brilliant, caring, and dedicated nuns. It saddens me to lump all of these women into a sad stereotype.

Marcella Fox
Santa Rosa, Calif.

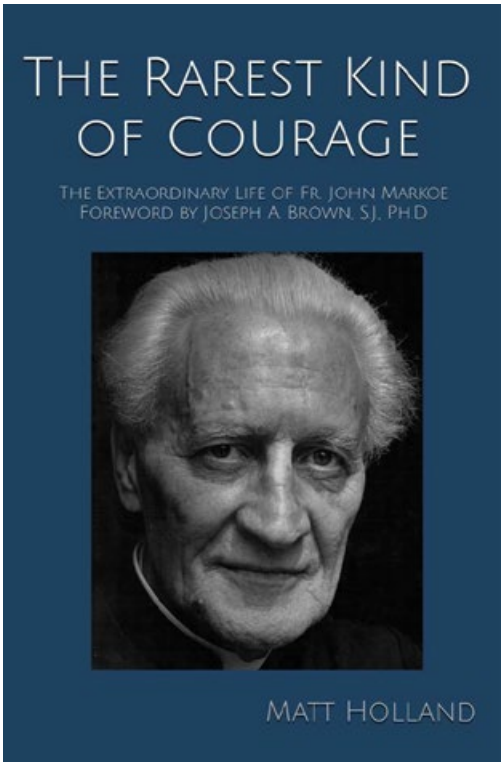
HAS THE OASIS DRIED UP?

I found the article by Rita Ferrone ("Back to the Font," April 2023) excellent. The "priesthood of the laity" hasn't been mentioned since the fifties. Being baptized as "priest, prophet, and king" isn't mentioned even in the rites. The placement of a proper font in Roman Catholic churches is too rarely understood as important, and Baptism itself loses significance along with the font. My parish hauls out a folding rack with a skimpy pan or bird bath set into it. Done with the Baptism? Fold it up again and it gets whisked away and out of sight. Font? Living water? Oasis on the way to the altar? That which we dip into and bless ourselves with—remembering our Baptism—as we make our way into the community? All dead. I mourn our collective ignorance of what the Spirit offered us at Vatican II. Has the oasis dried up?

Gertrud Mueller Nelson
San Diego, Calif.

SEEKING HUMAN CONNECTION

Your editorial "Hit Pause" (June 2023) was a welcome contribution to the discussion of AI. I was with you all the



A 1914 graduate of West Point, John Markoe was a gridiron hero who played against the likes of Jim Thorpe. He was a dashing, highly regarded cavalry officer - Dwight Eisenhower called him the best potential officer he'd ever seen - whose brief military career ended in shame and scandal. He was a Jesuit priest for fifty years and an alcoholic for fifty-seven. And for five decades he was a pioneering battler for racial equality, combining Jesuit spirituality with his military training as he worked in cities like St. Louis and Omaha to improve opportunities for African-Americans while striving to convince white Americans that racism was immoral.

The readers of this testimonial to resistance, persistence, and transcendence – manifested in the life of Fr. John Markoe, S.J. – will fall deep into the story of a man who "never gave an inch" in his pursuit of justice, all the while throwing prayer into his every endeavor. Thank you, Matt Holland, for bringing us the story of a true son of Ignatius, a soldier, scholar, advocate for justice, a man who never let his own weaknesses dissuade him from answering the call to transform the places where he journeyed. It gives us hope.

from the foreward by Joseph A. Brown, S.J., Ph.D
Professor; Director; School of Africana and Multicultural Studies
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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LETTERS

way until I got to "we should always have the option of communicating with a real person instead." It left me wondering how often you have tried to communicate with "a real person" while calling the so-called customer service number for any major corporation. I've lost track of how much time I've wasted over the years trying to do so. It would be depressing to count all those hours I will never get back.

Albert C. Pierce
Alexandria, Va.

HEAVEN STARTS HERE

Thank you, Bishop Stowe, for the beautifully constructed and expressed treatment of Pope Francis's vision of a synodal church ("From Aggiornamento to Synodality," June 2023). Thank you for recognizing the risk required by an ancient and sometimes too self-involved Church to assist us in avoiding an obliterative future. I have always felt that the purpose of this existence isn't to get my individual soul to heaven, expedited by "doing" charity; rather, it is charity (accompaniment) of others in discerning and creating the way to the peaceable kingdom, the beloved community of all humans and creation. Heaven starts here, not after we die. If we miss it, we'll miss it for all eternity.

Cathy Brown

JUST DOES NOT MEAN GOOD

Although another issue of *Commonweal* has now appeared, I wish still to register my disappointment with the Winright-Cavanaugh debate on the war in Ukraine ("Ukraine and the Ethics of War," May 2023). Mr. Cavanaugh does not bring a sufficiently discriminating perspective to the debate by neglecting to distinguish between a good war and a just war. Many, myself included, would argue that there is no such a thing as a good war. It does not follow that there is no such thing as a just war. The question is whether there are instances where waging war does not prevent greater evil and harm. Second, Cavanaugh suggests that nonviolent protest and noncooperation could be "a strategy for making Ukraine ungovernable by the Russians." The proven fact, however, is that Russia is interested only in authoritarian assertion of power. That is not governing in any meaningful sense of the word. Third, he cites Pope Francis as saying that the Soviet communist regime fell because of nonviolent protests. There were indeed protests, but the Soviet regime collapsed because Mikhail Gorbachev imagined there could be an alternative and freer form of Communist rule. No one should need reminding that Vladimir Putin detests what Gorbachev did and that it is one of the chief reasons he invaded the Ukraine.

J. M. Baker Jr.
Malvern, Penn.

Half Measures

In early July, the Supreme Court struck down two efforts to address unfairness in higher education. In decisions that broke along ideological lines, the six conservative justices declared unconstitutional both the Biden administration's student-loan cancellation order and race-based affirmative-action programs at Harvard and the University of North Carolina. Both decisions are dubious instances of judicial overreach that discount the injustices that made these efforts necessary.

Genuine American democracy requires widespread access to high-quality education, especially for Black Americans, who were first enslaved, then treated as second-class citizens, and still suffer from poverty and other social ills stemming from entrenched racism. Affirmative action made it possible for generations of Black and Latino students to gain educational opportunities they might otherwise have been deprived of. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson surely had it right in her dissent when she wrote: "Deeming race irrelevant in law does not make it so in life."

Yet it is also true that diversity-based affirmative action and debt relief were only half measures that left intact a system of higher education that launders privilege, price-gouges vulnerable students, and often fails to provide meaningful opportunity for those at the bottom. There are other, systemic measures—not barred by the Supreme Court's decisions—that would promote racial equity in higher education and provide access for Americans otherwise unable to attend college.

A 1978 Supreme Court ruling had previously weakened race-based affirmative action by holding that it could not be used to address past societal discrimination, but only to guarantee diversity as an educational ideal. Too often, as a result, affirmative action's benefits haven't accrued to poorer students of color. Writing in the *Atlantic*, Bertrand Cooper estimates from the available data that of 154 Black freshmen in Harvard's incoming 2020 class, just seven or eight would have come from families earning less than $85,000 per year. While racial diversity is clearly a desirable goal, it should not be conflated with deeper structural reparations. Nor should it be achieved using the methods employed by Harvard admissions officers, who devalued Asian students' applications using a "personal rating" system.

In some states that had already banned race-based affirmative action, universities saw an immediate and precipitous drop in racial diversity. After a 1996 ballot measure outlawed racial preferences in California, enrollment of Black and Latino students at UC Berkeley and UCLA fell by 40 percent. However, through aggressive recruitment efforts and a holistic review process that takes into account students' neighborhoods, high schools, and family incomes, the University of California system has admitted its most racially diverse classes in recent years. In 2021, moreover, 45 percent of the system's incoming students were low-income.

Other universities, including University of Michigan, have been less successful, but a 2012 study "found seven of 10 leading universities were able to return to previous levels of diversity through race-neutral means." Officials at both University of Michigan and University of California warned of the difficulties and expenses that come with the elimination of race-based affirmative action, but these expenses—for example, retooling admissions processes that favor affluent students and engaging in outreach to local Black and low-income communities—are well worth the money.

At institutions like Harvard, which play a radically inegalitarian role in our society, attention to students' socioeconomic background would be particularly welcome. At thirty-eight of the country's most selective colleges, more students come from families in the top 1 percent than from the bottom 60 percent. This is not a reflection of those students' innate intelligence. Wealthier applicants game the system through legacy networks, expensive test prep, and even participation in upper-crust pastimes like fencing and squash. Graduates of Harvard overwhelmingly pile into lucrative fields like consulting, tech, and finance. What's more, these institutions accrue massive endowments. In 2014, Yale paid almost $480 million to fund managers and just $170 million in tuition assistance.

Meanwhile, institutions that serve less well-off students—public universities, community colleges, and HBCUs—are struggling. State funding for public colleges and universities has dropped precipitously, resulting in reduced faculty and course offerings, campus closures, and dramatic tuition increases. Without sufficient funding, public colleges increasingly operate more like private ones: overspending on administrators, skimping on faculty and financial aid, and adding amenities to attract affluent students.

The Biden administration's debt-cancellation program would have provided much-needed relief to borrowers failed by this broken system. The ruling blocking the program relied on a manufactured plaintiff and a dubious conservative legal theory known as the "major questions doctrine." Biden has promised to forgive debt by other means, but the new strategy will face similar barriers.

Legislation is clearly needed to address root causes. Last month, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) reintroduced a bill that would make community colleges and vocational schools free for all, and public universities and HBCUs free for families in the bottom 80 percent. This "public option" would eliminate the shameful debt piled on millions of young Americans beginning their adult lives. It would open up education pathways to many of those currently shut out of the system, including many students of color. And it would eliminate distorting market pressures. In short, it would help turn education into the public good it should be, instead of the hoarded commodity it now is.

Gun Crazy

The word "quixotic" inevitably appears in coverage of Gavin Newsom's campaign for a Constitutional amendment enshrining common-sense gun control. The Democratic governor of California calls his effort a "mechanism to address the echo chamber of despair"—the despair arising from ever-more-frequent mass shootings and conservative court decisions rolling back even modest gun restrictions. Newsom's proposed Twenty-Eighth Amendment is hardly the comprehensive measure this country would need to stop the bloodshed. It would merely raise the minimum age to buy a gun from eighteen to twenty-one, mandate universal background checks, impose a waiting period for purchasing a gun, and ban assault weapons. The proposal is bound to go nowhere, but the governor insists that *something* has to be done. "I got four damn kids, dude, I can't take it anymore," Newsom recently said. "This is insane."

That word is not too strong. Before July 4, the United States was already on pace to exceed the carnage of last year. Then the long holiday weekend brought shootings in Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia; in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and Elizabeth City, North Carolina; in Lexington, Kentucky, and Shreveport, Louisiana, and many other places—twenty-two mass shootings in seventeen states that killed at least twenty Americans and injured more than a hundred others.

At the same time, some of the worst mass shootings of recent years were back in the news. In June, the shooter who killed eleven worshippers at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018 was found guilty in a federal death-penalty trial. On July 7, the shooter who killed twenty-three people in a racist attack at an El Paso Walmart in 2019 was given ninety consecutive life sentences. On July 3, families of victims of the 2018 Parkland, Florida, school shooting—in which seventeen people were killed—toured the halls and classrooms of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, scheduled for demolition now that it is no longer needed as evidence in the trials of the gunman or of the police deputy accused of failing to stop him.

The deputy, Scot Peterson, was acquitted by a jury in late June of felony child neglect and culpable negligence, charges stemming from the allegation that he didn't follow his training for confronting an active shooter. Parkland parents reacted angrily to the verdict, with some decrying "another failure of the system" (last year, the gunman escaped the death penalty). Their disappointment and distress are entirely understandable, and they are not wrong to seek accountability. But it was the correct decision. Punishing a civil servant for failing to stop a slaughter single-handedly is an obvious instance of scapegoating. It puts the burden of responsibility that our whole government and society should bear all on one person. This attempt to shift the blame to Peterson is yet another sign—on top of calls to arm teachers and subjecting children to active-shooter drills—that we've decided to accept mass shootings as a feature of American life.

This is the toll of acceptance: as of mid-July, the Gun Violence Archive's tally of mass shootings stood at 372 for the year so far, and the number of mass murders committed with guns at twenty-seven. Since the Parkland massacre, there have been more than two hundred attacks on schools by people with easy access to high-powered firearms. Four in ten Americans now believe it is at least somewhat likely that they'll be the victim of a shooter within the next five years. Newsom's Twenty-Eighth Amendment may be very unlikely, but it isn't crazy. What's crazy is the status quo.

—Dominic Preziosi

Imperiling Migrants at Sea

On June 14, a fishing trawler carrying hundreds of desperate migrants capsized in the Mediterranean off the coast of Greece. Of the approximately 750 people crammed onto the boat, almost six hundred died, including a hundred children.

The few survivors recount hellish conditions on the journey. The *Adriana* set out from Libya, where smugglers forced migrants into dangerously overcrowded conditions. On the second day, the ship's engine began to malfunction. On the third, food and clean water ran out, and six people died. When the boat finally capsized on the fifth day, the majority of survivors were those who had a spot on the upper deck. According to the *New York Times*, the people forced to remain below deck "stood no chance" of survival.

The Greek coast guard sent a helicopter and a small patrol boat to observe the *Adriana* and enlisted the help of private vessels to bring drinking water to the ship, but they did not undertake a rescue mission. They also rejected repeated offers for assistance from Frontex, the European Union border agency. Greek coast guard officials insist that because the ship was on a steady route to Italy and did not want or require a rescue, they didn't need to intervene. But a subsequent investigation by the *Washington Post* concluded that these claims do not hold up to scrutiny: "Maritime rescue and legal experts said that based on information it had early in the day, the coast guard should have initiated a full-scale rescue operation." The *New York Times* also determined that lives were lost because "the Greek government treated the situation like a law enforcement operation, not a rescue." A report by the *Guardian* found that the patrol boat attempted to tow the *Adriana*—a dangerous maneuver with such an over-

crowded boat—and that this may have caused it to capsize. The Greek coast guard denies that it attempted a tow.

The wreck of the *Adriana* was the deadliest accident in years in the most dangerous migrant route in the world. The United Nations estimates that more than twenty thousand people have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Africa since 2014, when migration to Europe began to increase dramatically. At first, some European countries, especially Germany, were somewhat hospitable to those attempting to migrate. But over time, right-wing parties that promise to keep migrants out have gained more support throughout Europe; indeed, a week and a half after the *Adriana* sank, Greek voters gave the right-wing New Democracy party a majority in parliament.

Today, the dominant strategy of European governments is one of deterrence; they want to make the journey into Europe as difficult as possible. The EU and national governments have made deals with Turkey and Libya to intercept or detain migrants, sometimes in inhumane conditions. European governments have restricted the work of non-governmental search-and-rescue groups. As in the case of the *Adriana*, they have avoided doing their basic duty to rescue people in danger at sea. At times, they have even actively imperiled people; the *New York Times* revealed the Greek coast guard's use of "pushbacks," in which migrants who make it to shore are placed on rafts and abandoned at sea. The former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis insists that this amounts to "an explicit attempt to… weaponize mass death": "The message [is]…'these people need to be sacrificed.'" There may be no easy solution to the migrant crisis, in Europe or at our own southern border. But Europeans and Americans should at least be able to rule out any policy that involves callously making a cautionary example of migrant suffering and death in order to discourage more migration.

—Regina Munch

Heat Check

Because of wildfires in Canada, the sky above New York City turned orange in June. Smoke partially eclipsed the sun and caused the worst air-quality levels on record for the city. Most New Yorkers wisely stayed inside, and the streets of Manhattan fell silent, eerily reminiscent of the early days of the pandemic.

After blanketing the Midwest, the smoke eventually cleared, just as temperatures started to rise across the country. A record-setting heatwave in Texas lasted for more than a week and sent hundreds of people to the emergency room. Temperatures throughout the South registered 20 degrees higher than normal, while parts of northern California experienced a sudden spike in temperatures following a cooler-than-usual start to the summer. On the Fourth of July, likely the hottest day on earth in 125,000 years, 57 million Americans were exposed to dangerous heat, the leading weather-related cause of death in the United States.

El Niño is one cause of this year's severe heat. This naturally occurring phenomenon, marked by warmer waters in the Pacific, disrupts jet streams and weakens trade winds, raising temperatures around the world. But the more general cause is climate change, which exacerbates El Niño. The result has been flooding in Oklahoma, Chicago, Vermont, and upstate New York, as well as the aforementioned wildfires in Canada, which released more carbon than Indonesia did in all of 2022. Wildfires in California now account for as much pollution as fossil fuels do.

Of course, the United States is not alone in suffering from extreme weather. While Texans were enduring the recent heat wave, just across the border in Mexico, twenty-three states were under weather alerts. The city of Hermosillo, in northwest Mexico, registered a record high temperature of 121 degrees. On the other side of the planet, at least ninety-six people died during a heat wave across two of India's most populous states. And in Beijing, temperatures neared triple digits for nine consecutive days in June and July, while more than ten thousand people were displaced because of floods in the central province of Hunan.

The effects of climate change are catching up with us and, if we fail to act, they will become both more common and more extreme. According to the First Street Foundation, a research group that analyzes climate risk, over the next three decades, the average number of Americans experiencing consecutive days of temperatures over 100 degrees each year will climb from 46 percent to 63 percent.

Cities are the places most susceptible to rising temperatures, and the poor and people of color are the populations most vulnerable to health problems related to heat and poor air quality, from chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder to heat stroke. Making sure every American has access to air-conditioning, either in their own home or in public facilities, is essential. Doing so without burning yet more fossil fuels is equally essential.

Fortunately, as environmentalist Bill McKibben recently pointed out, such an undertaking is more feasible than ever. Previous investments in solar power helped keep the notoriously unreliable Texas state grid operational last month, providing more than sixteen thousand megawatts, or 20 percent of its total power needs. "The power of the sun gives us a chance to allow the functions of the world as we know it to continue," McKibben wrote, "without increasing the temperature of the earth." Adding solar power to existing energy grids is a practical way to address rising temperatures today and a viable solution for reversing the effects of climate change in the coming years, before our blue skies permanently burn orange.

—Miles Doyle

A group of breaker boys working in a coal mine in Pittston, Pennsylvania, 1911

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MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY

Child Labor Isn't in the Past

Children still need protection from big business in the United States.

I recently took my family to a favorite hometown attraction, the Lackawanna County Coal Mine Tour. I grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where anthracite mining was once a major industry, and the coal-mine tour gives contemporary residents a glimpse of what their ancestors endured underground.

As a child, I was fascinated by stories of kids at work in the mines: breaker boys, nippers, mule drivers. But this time, holding my youngest child's hand in the dark, chilly tunnel, I shuddered as our guide described the routine tragedies of mining life: children losing fingers and limbs, or losing a father to a cave-in and having to go to work to replace him. She explained the economic system that attracted and then bound the families who lived in company housing, bought their necessities from company stores, and got as little for their labor as the bosses could get away with.

I came to the surface grateful for unions and labor laws, for school and all the other enriching opportunities that fill my children's days. I picked up a book, *Growing Up in Coal Country* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, to fill out my children's notions of life in the unenlightened past. And then I read a story in the *Washington Post* about how, in 2023, Republican-controlled state legislatures are rolling back restrictions on child labor, using legislation created and promoted by a think tank ironically called the Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA).

Reporters Jacob Bogage and María Luisa Paúl connected the FGA to efforts gaining ground in several states. The Iowa assembly passed a law that allows fourteen-year-olds to work the night shift and fifteen-year-olds to work on assembly lines. In Arkansas, children under sixteen no longer need to obtain work permits or have their ages verified by employers. The talking points supporting these laws are always about parents' rights and freedom from government intrusion, and supporters talk about teens who want to work a few hours after school to gain valuable experience and build character. The FGA's vice president, Nick Stehle, told the *Post* his organization advocates "removing the permission slip that inserts government in between parents and their teenager's desire to work." That sounds swell, until you remember why the government got between kids and their prospective bosses in the first place.

The children in Pennsylvania coal towns a century ago might have expressed a "desire to work," if you'd asked them how they felt about it. Younger kids might have found it a

Those families knew there was no freedom in feeding their own children to the system that kept them in poverty.

more exciting prospect than going to school. Older boys knew going to work could keep their families from getting thrown out of their company-owned homes. But kids are famously bad at weighing risks. And whatever their motivations, those workers weren't "free." The labor movement fought for laws restricting child labor because those families knew there was no freedom in feeding their own children to the system that kept them in poverty. They knew the United States should not be a nation where poor children have to choose between attending school and supporting their families.

We don't even have to look to the last century to understand what happens when kids become cheap labor. Present-day efforts to roll back worker protections are happening alongside a surge in illegal child labor in the United States, as established earlier this year in a remarkable report by *New York Times* journalist Hannah Dreier. Thousands of children, mostly recent arrivals from South America, work the night shift in Michigan factories and fall asleep in school during the day. Or they work on construction crews in Florida and skip school altogether. They need money to send home to their families living in poverty in places like rural Guatemala, or to pay off the sponsors who got them into the United States with the promise of a place to stay.

Dreier's reporting described "a chain of willful ignorance" that leaves those children open to exploitation: companies outsource hiring to third parties, then pretend not to notice when the workers reporting for duty are underage. Government agencies, understaffed and underfunded, can't properly vet sponsors before releasing unaccompanied minors to their supervision, adequately track those minors once they are released, or send out enough workplace inspectors to enforce existing child-labor laws. And the children can't upset the system without endangering the families counting on them back home.

Republicans have taken note of the underclass of child laborers exposed in Dreier's reporting, but only as a launching pad for attacks on the Biden administration's immigration policies. They're not supporting more funding for overwhelmed government agencies, just rooting for more punitive measures to keep migrants out.

Our guide in the mine explained to my wide-eyed children that, back in the day, there were no laws against children working dangerous jobs. From Bartoletti's book, I learned that wasn't quite true: after 1885, boys younger than twelve could not legally work sorting coal in the breaker, and a boy had to be fourteen before working underground. "But parents and coal operators found it easy to get around the law in Pennsylvania, which had no compulsory regulation of births." Everyone knew the six-year-old breaker boys were hired with fraudulent papers. Everyone looked the other way.

Those children, posing for photographers with their lunch pails and coal-blackened faces, look to us like ghosts from a shameful past. But they are no different from the kids in sneakers putting up scaffolding and working assembly lines today. Their parents loved them and couldn't keep them safe; their employers took advantage of their poverty; their comfortable contemporaries shrugged. They deserved better. And we know better. Corporations will always seek to boost profits any way they can; the limits have to come from us. We can't afford to play dumb as labor protections fail and disappear. Treating children like cheap labor costs too much.

MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY *is editor-at-large at* Commonweal.

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI

End Credits

The Berlusconi show is over, but Berlusconi's political legacy will last

More than two thousand guests were in attendance at Milan Cathedral on June 14 for the state funeral of Silvio Berlusconi, the businessman-turned-politician who served four different times as Italy's prime minister and who died at the age of eighty-six of leukemia. His notorious lifestyle—two marriages, one engagement, a quasi-marriage, countless affairs, sexual scandals, and disregard for the law, though that doesn't even capture everything—was decried by many Italians and celebrated by millions of others. So when the moment came there was a question as to whether Milan Archbishop Mario Delpini would deliver a condemnation or a eulogy. What he offered was neither. "What can we say about Silvio Berlusconi?" the archbishop asked from the pulpit. "He was a man: a desire for life, a desire for love, a desire for joy. He was a man and now meets God." It was an acknowledgment of the ambiguous moral legacy Berlusconi leaves to his country and to Italian Catholicism. His political legacy is far more clear.

Berlusconi entered the scene with a splash in late 1993, and by 1994 transformed Italy's infamously chaotic multiparty politics—which for half a century had revolved around the centrist Christian Democratic Party and the Communist Party—into a two-coalition system. One coalition consisted of "Forza Italia" (his own personal party, with a name stolen directly from soccer fans), the neo-fascist National Alliance, and the independentist Northern League; the other was a center-left group with the

former Communist Party as its major partner. The suddenness of his success shocked political experts and ordinary citizens alike, and in retrospect looks like a foreshadowing of Donald Trump's 2016 election. He was the inventor of a political system centered on himself.

Like Trump, Berlusconi brought a mogul's understanding of the world to politics. Like Rupert Murdoch, he was keenly aware of how a government and the law could impact his media empire. He viewed the collapse of the Christian Democratic Party and the normalizing of the Communist Party in terms of the potential danger to his business, and while in office he rewrote rules on fraud, corruption, and other financial crimes to shield himself and his companies from prosecution. Yet he also understood better than others how momentous events like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union could affect Italy and Europe more broadly. And he had a knack for speaking to (and for) the segment of Italian society holding a lingering affinity for Mussolini's Fascist regime and its postwar adherents.

Berlusconi's "businessman populism" was a preview of today's disruption of the liberal order. In international relations, he accepted the post-1945 alignment of Italy with the West—but emphasized transactional and deal-oriented friendships with foreign leaders over any sense of shared values. His gaffes with various world figures were legendary, and they remain a source of embarrassment for many Italians. His pro-Israel stance aided the rise of Benjamin Netanyahu's Right. He claimed credit for ending the Cold War thanks to the 2002 summit in Italy between George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, the latter of whom—along with Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—is at the center of tensions with the West today. But Berlusconi never made a secret of his preference for Putin over Germany's Angela Merkel; he even spent holidays and birthdays with him.

In domestic politics, Berlusconi achieved his major goal of keeping the Left out of power. Though he lost two elections, they were both to former Christian Democrat Romano Prodi, a centrist civil servant (and a Catholic) whom he could not accuse of being a Communist. He also managed to build a more friendly relationship between Italian conservatism and the European Union, giving key political support to the appointments of technocrats Mario Monti as member of the government of the European Union in 1994 and Mario Draghi as president of the European Central Bank in 2011. But he failed in modernizing the Italian economic system along libertarian lines, and when Italy found itself in dire fiscal straits in 2011, he was ousted from power under pressure from the markets and European leaders—but not before implementing some of the worst aspects of the neoliberal gig-economy model. His thirty years in politics also coincided with the deindustrialization of Italy (auto and auto-component manufacturing in particular). And, of course, he did nothing to address migration—though the technocratic governments that succeeded him were no more welcoming to migrants than he was.

Italy is now a country in decline demographically and economically. It is less inclined to invest in the future, depending more and more on the European Union and a shrinking number of industrial sectors. Socially, it is

Silvio Berlusconi attends a session at Parliament in Rome, September 22, 2011.

CNS PHOTO/ALESSANDRO BIANCHI, REUTERS

more unjust. Berlusconi succeeded in defending his own business empire and in moderating and rehabilitating the neo-Fascist extreme Right, with Giorgia Meloni becoming prime minister in September 2022 (Berlusconi reluctantly had to accept her as his successor). With his moderating presence now gone, it will be interesting to see how Meloni chooses to proceed.

Something that distinguished Berlusconi from other Italian politicians was the way he managed to turn Antonio Gramsci's theory of "cultural hegemony" into practice in the age of television. More than a decade before winning his first election, he was already shaping Italian culture through his media holdings and as owner of the popular AC Milan soccer club. Though he'd made money as a real-estate developer, his success in breaking up Italy's public-television monopoly enabled him to really strike it rich. For the first twenty years of Italian TV, viewers paid subscription fees and received content that was shaped by the Catholic sensibility of the Christian Democrats in government. But Berlusconi brought about a thorough cultural change: from the late 1970s into the '80s, his free channels raked in huge sums from commercial advertising, thanks to popular programming like American-made television movies and Latin American *telenovelas* that introduced Italians to a whole different way of life. There was new language, new style, new material expectations—much of it conveyed through or alongside a never-ending stream of highly sexualized images of women. It's hard to overstate the effect this had on the Italians watching television at that time (including yours truly).

Berlusconi had no sense of public service or the *res publica*, and he used his power and popularity to ward off countless investigations for alleged white-collar crimes. He was convicted only once, in 2013, when he received a four-year sentence for tax evasion. He served no time, but performed a year of community service working with Alzheimer's patients in a Catholic nonprofit near Milan. Though this also cost him a parliament seat, he never lost control of his personal party, and he was reelected senator in September 2022.

He loved to be loved, not just by women, but by all the people. Throughout his life, and even as prime minister, he remained a salesman. "Berlusconi considered everything and everyone, only and always, primarily as an audience, without making too much difference between that of TV viewers, consumers of commercials and supermarkets, and citizens and voters of a democracy," wrote the Italian commentator Luca Berra. Berlusconi's death symbolizes the end of television as the most influential medium, its replacement by digital and social media now firmly cemented.

With three decades on Italy's political stage, Berlusconi couldn't help but have an impact on the nation's relationship with the Catholic Church. But how to characterize that impact? He was himself a "cultural Catholic," in his own shallow way. He knew it was politically fruitless to push conservative American-style culture-war issues (especially abortion), but he also nominally supported the Church's opposition to liberal legislation on euthanasia, civil unions, and same-sex marriage. First and foremost a businessman, he was far more interested in selling himself than in standing up for what the Church labeled "the non-negotiable values." And with the lifestyle he embodied and the values he promoted both through his very public private life and his media empire, he was undeniably a factor in the de-Christianization of Italian society.

Still, many in the Church's hierarchy in Italy and in the Vatican sought—and received—the blessing of Berlusconi. For many John Paul II and Benedict XVI bishops, Berlusconi was a man of providence, achieving the historic goal of thwarting the rise of Italy's ex-Communists and defeating the alliance between leftists and progressive Catholics. Some Church leaders, such as the former president of the Italian bishops' conference and vicar for the diocese of Rome, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, remain grateful to Berlusconi for having opposed the post-Christian Democrats—the so-called "grown-up Catholics"—who, following a series of scandals in the early 1990s, sought greater autonomy for the political and public sphere and freedom from confessional and clerical interference.

Yet center-right hopes that Berlusconi might help bring about a more militant Catholicism were never fully realized. An attempt to mold Italian Catholicism into a "civil religion," especially after 9/11, did not succeed; large parts of the Italian Church, including many bishops, were uncomfortable with, if not allergic to, "Berlusconism," and distrusted his neo-conservative, culture-war *consiglieri*. The most politicized of these Church leaders have died, retired, or even converted to "Bergoglism." And Pope Francis has promoted very different kinds of pastors in Italy than those appointed by the two previous popes. Even the alliance between Berlusconi and Cardinal Ruini's faction of the Italian Church was breaking down in 2010, thanks to the prime minister's involvement in a prostitution scandal. It finally came apart in November 2011, when Berlusconi's last government fell.

If Berlusconi's influence on Italian Catholicism is a mixed bag, his political legacy is plain. There is not even the slightest threat of the Left taking over Italy anytime soon—and it was that possibility that prompted Berlusconi to build, fund, and lead a political party in the first place. The right-wing alliance that he helped spawn is in firm control, and far less moderate than the version he brought into being in 1994. When Berlusconi died, Giorgia Meloni put parliamentary sessions on hold for a week and declared his funeral a national day of mourning. In one way it was a sign of tribute. But it was also a sign that right-wing politics in Italy is now a thriving venture in itself, and no longer dependent on the wealth and celebrity of a showman.

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Lumen Christi parish, in Mequon, Wisconsin, combines elements of the two parishes that merged to form it.

JON METZ

A Win-Win-Win?

Lay parish directors offer an alternative model for addressing the priest shortage.

In 2005, two parishes in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, St. James in Mequon and St. Cecilia in Thiensville, merged to become one combined parish named Lumen Christi. The rationale for the merger was a familiar one: the archdiocese's worsening priest shortage. I joined the pastoral staff of Lumen Christi in 2013, when the then-merged parish was evaluating whether they should combine into one geographic site, using the St. James church building rather than both locations. When the parish held a listening session to discuss the issue, a debate quickly broke out about how to furnish the combined site. People from St. James insisted that they could not bear to lose their crucifix. Someone else suggested that they could utilize the tabernacle from the St. Cecilia site, since it seemed the crucifix had to stay. People continued to chime in with opinions about how to best combine pieces of both spaces.

An older gentleman raised his hand and stood up. He looked around the room and said, "My grandfather was baptized at St. Cecilia. I was baptized at St. Cecilia. My son and granddaughter were both baptized at St. Cecilia. I am sorry about your decorating dilemma, but I want you all to know that I am not too excited about leaving my home parish to go worship at yours."

Nine years later, Lumen Christi has combined into one site in a way that honors both former parishes, and their process is an example of how to manage mergers thoughtfully. But the man's comments have stuck with me, and I continue to be sad for his loss. It seemed to me that parish mergers and closures were ripping apart communities and bringing unnecessary pain. I wondered why the preferred method of dealing with the priest shortage,

COURTESY OF LUMEN CHRISTI PARISH

in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and elsewhere, has been to merge parishes, when an alternative exists.

This alternative is Canon 517.2, which allows lay or deacon leaders to serve as the administrators and spiritual leaders of their parishes. The canon states:

> If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care.

Rather than requiring a single priest to be the head of the parish, and closing a parish when one isn't available, this model allows other qualified members of the faithful to lead the parish day-to-day. Such leaders are most commonly referred to as "parish-life coordinators," but they also go by "parish administrators" or "ministers of Canon 517.2" (which rolls off the tongue). In Milwaukee, these ministers are known as parish directors.

According to data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, since the 1960s, the number of active priests in the United States has dropped by 38 percent. Today there are six times more parishes without resident priests. In Milwaukee, the numbers are even more dire: a 73 percent drop in the number of priests since the 1970s. Seventy percent of priests here are sixty or older. Milwaukee has used the Canon 517.2 model increasingly since the 1980s, but still not very often; parish administrators make up only 7 percent of the total parish leadership in the archdiocese. At the same time, as a result of mergers and closures, the number of parishes has decreased from 265 to 197.

Given this reality, I wanted to know more about the experience of parish directors in Milwaukee. Does this model of leadership work? What challenges do parish directors face? Why is this model not used more? Could it be a long-term solution to the priest shortage? With permission from the archdiocese, in 2017 and 2018 I conducted research interviews with the eleven parish directors in Milwaukee at the time—four laywomen, three laymen, and four deacons. These ministers had served in the role between half a year and twenty-two years. They were open and generous in sharing their stories and provided valuable information about Canon 517.2 that is of use to the whole U.S. Church.

It is surprising how different Catholics' perceptions of what it means to be a parish can be. Most Catholics have never experienced a lay or deacon parish director, but for those who have, they do not flinch at this alternative form of leadership. I recently told a colleague who was raised in a lay-led parish about my research on Canon 517.2. Her first reaction was surprise: "Isn't that normal?" she asked. The truth, however, is that communities led by parish directors are still fairly rare.

But according to the parish directors I spoke with, the model works. They spoke especially of a renewed vibrancy in parishes that might have otherwise died—new committees, new initiatives, or new programs that got many parishioners involved and active. They also said that their parishioners feel known in a way they hadn't before. Catholics tend to defer to a priest-pastor, which can mean that they don't become involved in parish life or governance. This is not spiritual laziness (in most cases), but it can create a lack of responsibility in some Catholics. But when there is no priest to lead, parishioners have to step up. They often feel responsible for the well-being of their parish and are empowered to get creative.

The other side of this bargain is that parish directors feel especially accountable to their parishioners for providing a good experience of Church life. When the leadership structure of a community is upended, its members reevaluate why they are a part of that community, and parish directors feel that they need to work hard to remind people why they should stay. As Bridget, one of the parish directors, said, "It has to be meaningful, or else [parishioners] have other stuff to do."

One secret to their success is their "ministry of presence." This kind of pastoral attention is not a new approach, but it does require an available and engaged person to attend to parishioners' needs. In the current shortage situation, too many priests are pastoring multiple parishes, or are asked to stay in active ministry far beyond their prime. By expanding the leadership pool, parishes can ensure that leaders have time to engage with their communities. For far too long, we have overburdened our priests with lofty expectations that can lead to burnout and communities starving for engaged leadership.

Where exactly, then, do priests fit into the parish-director model? Canonically speaking, each minister serving under Canon 517.2 must have a supervising priest, and this relationship is a wonderful opportunity for mentoring for the parish directors. In addition to the supervising priest, there can be an assisting priest assigned to help with the sacramental life of the parish. This assisting priest is often a "senior priest" retired from full-time active ministry. Assisting priests love ministry and being connected to a parish community, but are glad to put the days of managing staff and suffering through finance-council meetings behind them. One of the biggest surprises of my research was the consistently positive relationship between the parish director and the assisting priest, which parish directors described as respectful partnerships.

One critique of this model is that it could reduce the priest to a "sacramental dispenser." While the potential for this does exist, the Milwaukee priests serving in this role wholeheartedly disagreed with this description. In the best case, the assisting priest builds a relationship with the community, where they are a consistent presence. While they can't take on all the leadership of a parish, they can continue to bring their spiritual gifts to the faithful.

The canon is one of the boldest ways laypeople have been empowered since Vatican II, giving them a practical and authentic share in Church leadership on a local level.

The parish directors described a "best of both worlds" scenario: there is still a priest in the community, but a well-qualified, passionate lay or deacon parish director can handle the day-to-day operations and leadership. As Michael Scott said in *The Office*, "It is a win-win-win": for the parish directors who are empowered and supported in their leadership; for the assisting priests who can share their priestly vocation without being bogged down by bureaucracy; and for the parish community that benefits from a dynamic duo of leadership.

There are only a handful of dioceses in the United States that use the Canon 517.2 model. Why has there been such hesitation to take it up? Admittedly, it is nontraditional. Most Catholics associate parish life with a priest-pastor and haven't had much opportunity to imagine what other models could look like. To some, this model could look like a threat to the status or role of the ordained.

Certainly, the model only works in a diocese with a bishop supportive of the use of Canon 517.2. It's the bishop who authorizes the placements of parish directors—or he can choose not to. The three archbishops who have led Milwaukee since the 1980s have had varied levels of enthusiasm for an alternative model of leadership; with every leadership change, the momentum of the model is thrown into jeopardy.

Moreover, hesitancy about the model doesn't necessarily mean it is never implemented; it often means that when it is implemented, it is done so haphazardly and with minimal support for parish directors. Of the eleven parish directors in this study, four were placed in parishes under "emergency circumstances"—meaning that there was not a long-term plan for them to take on leadership. Rather, they were placed there because the priests were suddenly unable to fulfill their assignments and there were no other priests available to take over. In these situations, the parish directors had little time to prepare or learn about the parish before assuming the role. One parish director reported feeling underprepared to manage a parish budget; another parish director described the awkwardness of being on the parish staff one week and overseeing it the next.

If this model were embraced in a proactive way, parish directors would have more opportunity to be successful. One of the most important things dioceses could provide to make this model work is more education. As it stands now, if a layperson wants to obtain an advanced degree in theology, they usually have to pay their own way. On the other hand, if a young man decides to enter priestly formation, he will have financial support and housing and be assured of the faithful's prayers for his vocation. Vatican II reminded the Church that all baptized are included in the "People of God" and are part of the family of faith, but it is clear that the Church prioritizes certain vocations over others.

And even the parish directors who are installed and supported sense that their roles are fragile. It's not uncommon for parishioners to ask, "When are we going to get a priest?" In a Church where clericalism still has a foothold, parish directors understand they are not always parishioners' first choice. As a result, they feel a need to be cautious in their leadership so as not to rock the boat. They also tend not to promote the good work they are actually doing, which can lead to a cycle of feeling undervalued. Women in particular feel that they have to be the "best of the best" to get and keep the role. Many of the women parish directors in Milwaukee have doctorates, university-teaching experience, and decades of experience in a pastoral role; without these, they may not have been considered. More vocal, formal support from the archdiocese could go a long way in educating the faithful about the role of parish directors.

Ultimately, the Canon 517.2 model is a temporary one. Without change to canon law, there can only be parish directors as long as there are also priest administrators and assisting priests. But based on my discussions with the parish directors of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, I am confident that this is a viable model for the foreseeable future to deal with a shortage of priests—a problem we face whether we like it or not.

It's worth noting that the canon is one of the boldest ways laypeople have been empowered since Vatican II, giving them a practical and authentic share in Church leadership on a local level. It echoes Vatican II's call to faithful service for all the baptized. If the bishops would embrace this model, they could develop a more inclusive, proactive plan to use parish directors. Dioceses could provide better training and place parish directors intentionally to help parishes thrive. It's also an incredible opportunity to elevate women to leadership roles in the Church and would make a bold statement of equality among the faithful.

In a time of uncertainty about the future of parish life, we have to ask ourselves a challenging question: What do we, as a Church, prioritize? Do we cling to an established leadership model that is struggling, or do we encourage the People of God to lead in their faith communities? If we embrace the latter, then we must let the Holy Spirit invigorate our leadership and enliven our faith communities in a way that breathes new life into the Church.

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ANDREW J. BACEVICH

The Politics of Avoidance

On the debt as on security, we prefer to ignore inconvenient facts.

According to President Biden, "the American people got what they needed" in the recent much-ballyhooed budget agreement. More accurately, Congress got what it needed: an escape from a contrived and utterly unnecessary crisis.

While the deal allows Americans to breathe a collective sigh of relief—the government has decided, after all, to pay its bills—let's not kid ourselves. It solves nothing, merely kicking further down the road a disconcerting reality that few in Washington are even willing to acknowledge: our so-called "indispensable nation" finds itself increasingly hard-pressed to manage its own affairs, much less the world's.

Future historians will marvel at how swiftly the United States fell from the pinnacle to which it ascended with the collapse of communism in the 1980s. Embedded in the so-called budget crisis are insights into how it happened so quickly. Not least among them is the collaboration between politicians and the media to imbue an essentially theatrical event with a veneer of seriousness.

What are the sources of the dysfunction that afflicts present-day Washington? Chief among them is a habit of pretending that facts aren't facts. Attributed in particular to Donald Trump, this tendency is by no means limited to the former president, with his habit of labeling as "fake news" aspects of reality that he finds unwelcome or inconvenient.

Trump is not alone in indulging this inclination. At least nominally, the budget crisis centered on an imbalance between what the federal government spends annually and what it collects in the form of taxes. For the current fiscal year, spending exceeds available revenues by nearly a trillion dollars. The cumulative debt resulting from this mismatch currently exceeds $31 trillion, larger than the overall size of the U.S. economy.

In recent years, that number has soared. As recently as fiscal year 2001, the total national debt was less than $6 trillion. While the GOP goes through the motions of bemoaning this imbalance, the profligacy of recent Republican presidents exceeds that of their Democratic counterparts. Even so, politicians of both parties periodically treat constituents to a sort of Kabuki dance in which they profess a commitment to fiscal restraint, which they then proceed in practice to disregard. All concerned blithely assume that the dollar's status as the reserve currency of the global economy is sacrosanct, endowing the United States with the unique prerogative of playing by its own rules.

The realm of national security offers a variation on the theme of Washington making its own rules. Here, too, the tendency to ignore inconvenient facts is rampant.

In the blink of an eye, Republican senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina described the bipartisan budget agreement as "a win for China." Graham's complaint is that by allocating a mere $886 billion of new military spending—a sum double what it was a decade ago—the deal shortchanges the Pentagon.

Paralleling bipartisan agreement on the budget is similar bipartisan agreement on national security. Graham's operative assumption, widely shared in Washington, is that the United States is already locked in a new cold war with China, with hot spots such as Taiwan potentially causing this cold war to boil over at a moment's notice.

The result is another Kabuki dance, with provocative behavior by U.S. forces marketed under the heading of "deterrence." As with the status of the dollar, Americans are long accustomed to having U.S. forces assert privileges—maintaining several hundred bases abroad, for example—that Washington would find objectionable in others. Just recall the near panic triggered by a wayward Chinese surveillance balloon drifting across the continental United States.

As they jockey for position in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. forces are incrementally moving toward a quasi-war footing. So too, of course, are Chinese forces. Deterrence becomes indistinguishable from a game of chicken conducted with warships and military aircraft.

Gearing up for a showdown with China comes at a convenient time for the Pentagon and the national-security apparatus more generally. It provides cover to disregard the costs and consequences of failed policies such as the now all-but-forgotten wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When it comes to asking for money, the Pentagon adheres to this hard-and-fast rule: don't look back; danger lies dead ahead. And indeed, hawks are already examining ways of using the Ukraine War to circumvent the cap on military spending written into the budget agreement. Their success is all but assured.

Distracted by bread and circuses—TV shows and pop stars—the American public neither demands nor expects anything better. A politics of escapism has vanquished the politics of accountability. This terrifying reality defines the actual state of our democracy.

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KATHERINE LUCKY

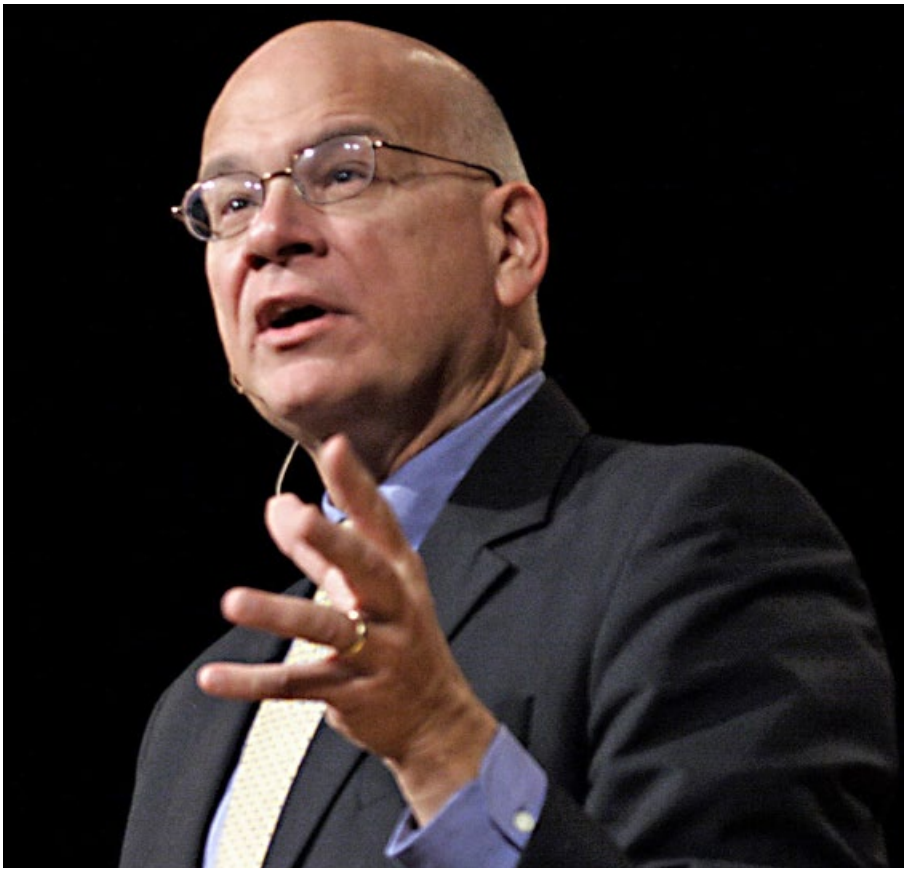
Conviction without Contempt

Remembering Tim Keller

When I was in college, I was part of a campus ministry that held weekly Bible studies and worship services. Occasionally, we evangelized. One of our campaigns invited students to text late-night questions about God in exchange for grilled-cheese sandwiches delivered to their dorm rooms. Another rallied around a simple message: "You are more"—more than your grades, your accolades, or your rejections. We gave out "You are more" laptop stickers and invited our peers to hear preaching on where their true value could be found. And every year, we distributed free books to students as they left the dining hall. One time—or maybe several times—that book was *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller's 2008 *New York Times* bestseller, which argues, methodically, for the existence of God and the truth of the Gospel. Keller died on May 19 of pancreatic cancer.

I spoke up in the Bible studies, sang in the worship services, and put a "You are more" sticker on my laptop. I even became the student ministry's co-president. But I never volunteered to answer late-night questions or hand out books. I never represented our faith in each year's public debate with the college atheist society. Evangelism was a little embarrassing to me. I was worried about losing my friends, offending my classmates, and damaging my reputation. These are not good reasons to keep quiet about one's faith. Nevertheless, these fears prevented me (often, they still do) from trying to bear witness to the Gospel. "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ," writes the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Oof.

Tim Keller in 2006



FRANK LICORICE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

While I didn't help distribute *The Reason for God*, I did take a copy for myself. I read the book over a summer break, far from campus and its associated pressures. Turns out, it was nothing to be embarrassed about. Keller, a pastor-theologian who had founded a church of thousands in Manhattan and written many other books—on the prodigal son, prayer, marriage (with his wife, Kathy), and pain—wrote with clarity and compassion. He quoted from poets and philosophers, theologians and scientists. "Tim wasn't an original scholar," Peter Wehner wrote in the *Atlantic*. "His strength was synthesis and integration."

In *The Reason for God*, Keller acknowledges that the reader's concerns about Christianity are reasonable: the problem of evil, the Church's involvement in injustice, sin and hell. He had answers to each—never overreaching, always upfront about what he couldn't know, nevertheless confident. On the fervor of fundamentalists: "The people who are fanatics are not so because they are too committed to the gospel, but because they're not committed enough to it." On judgment: "Can our passion for justice be honored in a way that does not nurture our desire for blood vengeance? Only if I'm sure that there's a God who will right all wrongs and settle all accounts perfectly do I have the power to refrain."

Keller took his readers and critics seriously; he never implied that secular people were stupid or morally inferior: "No matter who performs it, every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty is empowered by God." In fact, many people outside of the Church had identified the same problems—the existence of suffering, the need for transcendent human rights, their own enslavement to career or money or power—that Christians were concerned with. The challenge was

to offer a compelling response to those problems. "We all have fundamental, unprovable faith commitments," writes Keller. The question is: "Which set of unavoidably exclusive beliefs will lead us to humble, peace-loving behavior?" "Freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones," and grace "is only a threat to the illusion that we are free, autonomous selves, living life as we choose."

Nobody reading this book, I felt, could think that they were being tricked—that the real difficulties with believing in Jesus were being sidestepped. "No view of God can be proven," Keller acknowledges as he prepares to delve into arguments for the creation of the universe, the reality of the sin, and the historical fact of the Resurrection. "But that does not mean that we cannot sift and weigh the grounds for various religious beliefs and find that some or even one is the most reasonable." At the close of the book, after offering a presentation of the Gospel, Keller encourages readers not to pray the sinner's prayer in a moment of ecstasy, but instead to pause. Interested in Christianity? Examine your motives, count the cost, and visit a local church in order to begin the "lifelong process" of repentance and belief. Also, take heart. "You don't have to wait for all doubts and fears to go away to take hold of Christ," he writes. "Don't make the mistake of thinking you have to banish all misgivings in order to meet God."

When I learned of Keller's death, I thought about my encounters with his books and sermons, and found them, as I always had, *comforting*. They were both intelligent and invitational, serious and warm. Never bombastic, never frenzied, never making an altar call they hadn't earned. There are so many pastor scandals, so many faith-mongering hypocrites. Here was a trustworthy "celebrity" Christian who seemed to deserve his reputation. I was proud to be in the community he represented.

Keller's impact was quantifiably enormous: his multi-site Manhattan congregation, which attracted thousands of young professionals; the hundreds of other churches supported by his organization, City to City, including the church I attended when I lived in New York; his best-selling books; his irenic presentation of Christian beliefs in secular publications like the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*. He was a public intellectual. But his impact was also personal for nearly every evangelical I know. I can't count how many references to his teaching I've heard from the mouths of other pastors on Sunday mornings, always with a tone of respect, even deference: *Tim Keller said this, so chances are, it's right.*

His style of argumentation also resonated with secular people, and with people from other faith traditions. He wrote and preached assuming that they were in his audience; he stayed after his sermons for question-and-answer sessions. "I cannot despise those who do not believe as I do," he writes in *The Reason for God*:

> Since I am not saved by my correct doctrine or practice, then this person before me, even with his or her wrong beliefs, might be morally superior to me in many ways.... The Christian's identity is not based on the need to be perceived as a good person, but on God's valuing of you in Christ.

That message was appealing to outsiders, and sobering for those of us already in the Church. We "older brothers" of the prodigal son story were too assured of our own righteousness—or in my case, too timid about the truth of what we believed. Rereading *The Reason for God* almost a decade later, I'm still impressed by passages like this one:

> The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued and that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time.... I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less. I don't need to notice myself—how I'm doing, how I'm being regarded—so often.

I'm doing better at this. I'm more confident in my friendships, more anchored in my faith, and less anxious about my reputation. But sometimes telling strangers at a party that I work for a publication called *Christianity Today* is still an exercise in self-mortification.

I've also recognized that not all my resistance to "evangelism"—in-the-moment evangelism, quick-fix evangelism, confrontational evangelism—is bad. Some of my aversion is temperamental, but most of it is practical. Some people have their conversion experiences in a single worship service after receiving a cool laptop sticker; others need just a single one of their late-night questions answered correctly. But many, perhaps most, of us need to weigh our motives and count the costs, again and again. Many need not just one sermon, or one conversation, but dozens, hundreds: patient engagement and personal affection, and relationship above all else.

This is where Tim Keller really triumphed—not just as a thinker, but as a pastor characterized by kindness. He valued dialogue; he respected those who disagreed with him; he cared about people as *people*, not as names he could add to a list of saved souls. In the aftermath of his death, some of his critics have called his signature "winsomeness" a weakness. They say he avoided the culture wars too assiduously; he wasn't willing to fight the right fights, or at least, to fight them aggressively enough.

Nothing could be further from the truth, as Tim Keller himself helped me understand. "The real culture war," he wrote, "is taking place inside our own disordered hearts, wracked by inordinate desires for things that control us, that lead us to feel superior and exclude those without them, and that fail to satisfy us even when we get them." In the world as Keller understood it, weakness was strength and meekness was power and children entered the kingdom first. The King died on a cross and rose again; the new heavens and earth were at hand. The battle had already been won, and Keller wasn't here to fight it anew. He was simply here to share the good news.

KATHERINE LUCKY *is an editor at* Christianity Today.

Serious Play

Matthew Rose

The civil theology of Robert Bellah

Robert Bellah was the last major thinker on the American Left to argue that shared religious beliefs are essential for democratic politics. In an era that saw liberalism grow progressively more secular, he defended views that dissented from elite opinion and the models of reality on which it rested. He argued that secularism is impossible, individualism is an illusion, and religious worship is inescapable. He made these arguments in best-selling books that combined learning and civility with a zeal for the ideals of democratic socialism and a dread for the practices of managerial capitalism. Bellah was the most celebrated American sociologist of his time, and it might seem absurd to suggest he was ignored. Presidents, clergy, scholars, and community leaders all sought his counsel. But if they had listened to him closely, as Bellah privately doubted they had, what would they have heard?

By the time he completed his final book, two years before his death in 2013, Bellah had concluded that America stood at the bleak end of a civilizational epoch. In its coming "time of trial," as he called it, Americans would realize the values that had created their culture had also impaired their ability to understand or control it. Bellah's writings over seven decades offer a unique interpretation of this paradox. They span his work on American history, his pioneering studies of Asian, Islamic, and Native American traditions, and a concluding magnum opus on the history of religious evolution. Bellah consistently denied that our ordeal could be solved through conventional forms of activism, argument, or piety. It can be survived, he claimed, only through a painful reckoning with how our most cherished values created the very systems that now enslave us—and how they can be repaired only by learning from religious traditions we presume to have left behind.

Robert Bellah and David Little at the American Civil Religion consultation at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, February 1973

In 1961, Bellah was living in Japan on a Fulbright fellowship, unaware that his next lecture would become a major academic controversy. He had turned to the study of East Asia as a graduate student at Harvard in the early 1950s out of frustration with the shallowness of American consumer culture and a growing fascination with traditional societies. The lecture had been inspired by an encounter with a group of Shinto priests years before. During a visit to Cambridge, they pressed the young Japan specialist to explain why the Allies had required their country to privatize the Yasukuni Jinja, a shrine for the war dead, in accordance with the separation of church and state, while Arlington National Cemetery was allowed to operate under the federal government. Bellah's lecture was his attempt to explain to his Japanese hosts the role of religion in American civic life.

When it was later published in 1967, "Civil Religion in America" sparked intense debate. The article was written as Americans began to question the belief that their nation had charted paths—in economics, politics, culture, and religion—that other modernizing nations were destined to follow. Bellah acknowledged that America was in several respects the most modern of societies. But in other ways, he suggested, it was not so different from even primitive societies. This was especially the case in the relationship between religion and politics, where he saw clear evidence that America endowed its civic traditions with sacred significance. Bellah strongly disagreed that America's lack of an established church and its freedom of religion made it a secular society. America was and remained a country with a sacred center on which the legitimacy of its ideals and institutions depended.

Bellah called this America's "civil religion." He defined the term sociologically. It described the rituals, symbols, and language of civic life, not the private beliefs of individuals. He interpreted American history through the lens of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who argued that all societies—even those that seemed most secular—express their identities in religious symbols. For Durkheim, the nonobservant son of a rabbi, the truth of a religion is not found where both believers and unbelievers often assume it to be—in its official dogmas—but in the practices that promote group solidarity and commemorate social bonds. Bellah maintained that, when viewed from this perspective, America clearly possessed a national cult. It had its own civic rituals, liturgical calendar, and holy documents, as well as its own saints, prophets, martyrs, hymns, and pilgrimage sites. Bellah insisted that this national cult's celebration was not purely ceremonial. Nor did it worship what sociologist Will Herberg had dismissively termed the "American way of life." "The American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation," Bellah wrote, "but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality."

Bellah was raised Presbyterian. He was a descendent, he later joked, of "those dreadful people who march around Northern Ireland." As a teenager he experienced a conversion to the Social Gospel, and apart from a brief Marxist phase, he was outspoken about his faith during his four decades at the University of California, Berkeley. His 1967 article appeared at a moment when thinkers like Harvey Cox and John Rawls

Civil religion served the essential dual purpose of both legitimizing American institutions and providing grounds for their criticism.

were proposing visions of the "secular city" that left little place for religion. Bellah's critics accused him of sacralizing politics and idolizing the nation. He responded by noting that "a pure liberalism is a reductio ad absurdum and a sociological impossibility." But he also denied that America was a "Christian nation," even if its civic life was suffused with biblical symbols and themes. America's civil religion was its ingenious solution for religious pluralism, allowing people of different traditions to unite in pursuit of shared purposes. It did not settle political disagreements, of course, or prevent injustices. But according to Bellah, it provided the moral grammar through which Americans of different backgrounds and faiths could discuss the meaning of their common life.

America's civil religion was therefore the core of its national identity—a fact, Bellah lamented, to which contemporary scholars were usually blind. Its celebration in speeches, holidays, and elections held together a diverse people, joining, though never fully harmonizing, the different values and traditions that informed the country's founding. How did it do so?

Bellah's interest in theology was unusual among sociologists. He credited the work of Paul Tillich for rescuing his faith during a period of religious doubt, and for decades he advised students at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. America's public theology, he explained, was neither sectarian nor systematic. It was doctrinally vague, culturally pervasive, and legally invisible. It could not be found in the nation's laws or in its Constitution. It had no official text or clergy, and its interpretation was left up to politicians, poets, and preachers. But it served the essential dual purpose of both legitimizing American institutions and providing grounds for their criticism.

Bellah's "Civil Religion in America" was an unexpected turn for a scholar whose previous work had ranged from Apache kinship systems to the history of Tokugawa Japan. He later regretted that his "Babylonian captivity" to American studies had delayed his long-planned book on the evolution of religion. But it established him as a leading interpreter of American religious life. He wrote the article believing that civic religion had inspired the best of America, including the progressive causes he ardently supported. But almost as soon as it was published, Bellah began to doubt the ability of America's civil religion to solve lingering problems of economic and racial justice. He also came to question the character of a country whose values it enshrined.

As America emerged from the upheavals of the 1960s, Bellah turned to examine the religious impulses beneath its social unrest. He did so not by reflecting on the latest trends in theology, but by returning to the earliest questions of sociology. Bellah had entered his discipline when it was imbued with a belief in scientific and political progress. Its prestige in the postwar era reflected confidence in its power to solve social problems at home and to project American values abroad. Bellah shared the ambitions of sociology to offer a master explanation of human behavior, and his reputation as a "universal scholar" was well deserved. But his style of sociology, which preferred history to statistics, aligned it more closely with questions in the humanities than with the methods of the hard sciences.

What makes modern culture so different from the cultures that came before it? How did individualism, capitalism, and critical rationality come to transform human life? And why did modernity promise freedom to all but deliver oppression to so many? Sociology began in the nineteenth century as an attempt to understand the shattering transition from the settled patterns of traditional society to the disruptive revolutions of modern life. Its founding thinkers wanted to ameliorate the worst aspects of modern life—its loneliness, exploitation, moral chaos, and perceived meaninglessness—by showing how human beings are rooted in the structures of their societies. For a time, Bellah believed Karl Marx best answered these questions. He even joined the Communist Party—a decision that would later imperil his career. Though he always remained a man of the Left, he eventually broke with Marxism because he concluded that human behavior could not be explained entirely by material or economic factors. "Modernization," he countered, "is always a moral and a religious problem."

Bellah regarded religion as the central category for understanding human life. "The analysis of modern man as secular, materialistic, and in the deepest sense areligious," he wrote, "seems fundamentally misguided." He possessed a remarkable knowledge of the history and variety of religions. By "religion" he did not mean only one's personal beliefs about God or the supernatural, as Western thinkers have sometimes assumed. Bellah was sharply critical of the idea that individual beliefs defined religion more properly than "embodied, nonverbal practices." For Bellah, it is nonverbal language—the silent languages of gesture, body movement, and even facial expressions—that convey the most complex religious meanings. Taking the "deep history" of humanity as his guide, he therefore understood religion as the

way that human beings construe the world through symbol, myth, and ritual. He called his theory "symbolic realism," and refined it throughout his career. As Bellah saw it, everything that we do as human beings—our ability to think, speak, imagine, create, socialize, or play—is possible only through the symbolic forms by which we understand our place in the world:

> We have not begun to understand the full implications of religious language and symbolism. Social science has not begun to fathom the deep insights into human motives and human action that the religious tradition contains. But we do know that religious symbols are the way man has related himself, from the beginning of his existence as a cultural being, to the conditions of his existence. Through religious symbols man has symbolized to himself his own identity and the order of existence in terms of which his identity makes sense. These symbols are not "made up" by the human ego or deduced by rational reflection. They are born out of the tragedy and the suffering, the joy and the victory of men struggling to make sense out of their world. (*Beyond Belief*)

When Bellah applied his theory to 1970s America, what he saw alarmed him. His 1975 book, *The Broken Covenant*, described a nation being undone by its own symbols. The severity of its criticisms and the direness of its tone surprised many. Published on the eve of the nation's bicentennial, the book examined the dominant moral traditions in American history from the colonial period to the present, concluding that they could no longer be united in a common democratic purpose. "Today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell," Bellah announced. His most unsettling suggestion was that Evangelical Protestantism and Enlightenment liberalism, widely thought to be antagonists in the drama of American political life, had spawned an ideology that was undermining American institutions. What Bellah critically termed "individualism" was not the creed of self-governing citizens. It was the misguided ambition of individuals to be free from all unchosen commitments and the symbols that expressed them.

Bellah's concerns about American moral decline echoed those of a rising generation of American conservatives. He scorned the idea that society exists to liberate individuals from the burdens of nature and history, enabling them to achieve what they have the right but not the means to accomplish by themselves. But if Bellah was suspicious of liberalism, he was even more suspicious of conservatism—and not only in its libertarian forms. For one thing, he thought that religious conservatives often amplified the worst aspects of individualism. The Protestant emphasis on personal belief, he claimed, tended to absolve believers of communal responsibilities and blind them to social injustices. For another, Bellah was eager to learn from non-Western traditions, including those that harshly criticized American folkways. He was especially interested in the new religious movements emerging from the California counterculture, seeing in them glimpses of "a culture of imagination and not calculation," as he wrote in his 1970 book, *Beyond Belief*.

Bellah's openness to experiments in living was not limited to New Age spirituality and Bay Area religious movements. In the prefaces to his books, he often reflected on the personal experiences that influenced his scholarship, wondering whether his consuming interest in religion was a way of coping with the childhood trauma of his father's suicide. Bellah reserved more private thoughts for his diaries. As Matteo Bortolini revealed in an excellent biography, *A Joyfully Serious Man*, in the 1970s, Bellah experimented cautiously with LSD, an open marriage, and sexual relationships with men. His life had been turned over by the sudden and tragic loss of two daughters in a span of three years, and the decade was one of personal anguish and professional disappointment. Bellah had met Michel Foucault during the French scholar's visits to Berkeley, but in Bortolini's sensitive telling, Bellah's explorations of the Castro District had little of Foucault's transgressive spirit. Bellah told his wife, Nancy, that he was not gay—merely a pretend "bigamist" with unresolved confusion about his personal identity.

How was individualism changing American life? In search of an answer, Bellah undertook the only significant fieldwork of his career. Over a period of five years, he and his team extensively interviewed more than two hundred people. His subjects included business executives, stay-at-home mothers, activists, clergy, nurses, and union members. Some of them, like "Sheila," who revealed that she had created her own religion of "Sheila-ism," became among the most famous research subjects in the history of sociology. Bellah and his colleagues were interested in responses to a single question, which they posed in searching ways: How do you determine what is good and right in your daily life? They wanted to learn about the deepest sources of moral motivation and purpose—not as theorized by academics but as experienced by average people. Bellah set aside the writing of sociologists to listen to the voices of everyday Americans.

The resulting book, *Habits of the Heart,* became his biggest professional success, quickly selling nearly half a million copies and being named a Pulitzer finalist. Published in 1985, when Bellah was fifty-seven years old, it was celebrated as one of the most important works of sociology since David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). The book offered vivid portraits of Americans living amid what Ronald Reagan had recently called, on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, "the age of the individual." *Habits of the Heart* was eagerly embraced by leading Democrats, including Walter Mondale and Jerry Brown, who hailed it as an indictment of the policies of the reelected Republican president. Bellah was a committed Democrat and had been an advisor to Jimmy Carter, who brought Bellah to the White House before writing his notorious "malaise" speech in 1979. But the book avoided partisan debates, made no policy recommendations, and was welcomed by more than a few conservatives, including Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Novak.

Habits of the Heart was fundamentally a study of the impoverishment of moral language. It explored the dissonance between the way Americans lived their lives and the way they talked about them. It made two acute observations. The first was that virtually all Americans, no matter their religious back-

Bellah's deepest criticism of individualism was that it undermined the very conditions that make it possible.

ground or political persuasion, spoke a single moral language. Bellah called this the "first language" of individualism. When people explained how and why they made moral choices, Bellah discovered that they used a narrow ethical framework. They explained their decisions in terms of their own idiosyncratic preferences—saying that what is "good" is what they found personally satisfying or rewarding. Americans spoke highly about happiness, citizenship, and success. But they justified these values almost entirely in terms of their subjective preferences, rather than how they connected to higher obligations or a higher good. The important thing, they explained, is to be true to one's interests and sincere in expressing them.

The book did not, however, depict Americans as decadent or narcissistic, even if it noticed ominous trends in budding solipsists like Sheila. Bellah's second observation was equally penetrating: the way Americans justified their moral choices was often refuted by how they actually lived. He observed that Americans spoke as if they were "arbitrary centers of volition"—as if their moral impulses had no deeper foundation than their passing personal desires. Yet their actions suggested they sought enduring social commitments and binding civic obligations. They often gave generously, served their communities, and honored those who put the common good before their own. Bellah's conclusion was striking. The shallowness of the dominant moral culture prevented Americans from plumbing the depth of their own lives. The "first language" of individualism impaired their self-understanding, making their lives "sound more isolated and arbitrary than they actually are." Bellah lamented that Americans lacked the "secondary languages" of biblical religion and republican virtue, which earlier generations were able to draw upon.

Habits of the Heart portrayed a people suffering from a crippling case of moral mutism. Stripped of the ideas, narratives, and symbols that could express a richer vision of life, Americans were inarticulate about what mattered to them most. The book's most haunting sections showed people struggling to explain even the real sacrifices they had made for their families and spouses, describing their genuine self-giving as calculating self-interest. Bellah argued that the language of individualism had the effect of making people opaque not only to each other but also to themselves: "There are truths we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism." His deepest fear was not that Americans were morally confused but that, as they became habituated to the attitudes they expressed, their innermost identities would be altered as well—a degradation of character following a deterioration of language. "The irony," Bellah concluded, "is that just where we think we are most free, we are most coerced by the dominant beliefs in our culture."

Bellah's book saw into a future that is now our present. Its worries about the creeping loneliness and aimlessness in American life would be confirmed decades later by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. Bellah offered few practical solutions to the crumbling of community life, saying only that Americans needed to preserve "communities of memory" that engaged in "practices of commitment." He spoke as well of the need for an Aristotelian ethics of virtue, aligning himself with communitarianism, an intellectual movement that criticized liberalism for its neglect of how human identities are shaped by culture and history. Bellah was returning with renewed fervor to the questions that had inspired his career, and to the monumental book he had always hoped to write. If America was to survive its time of trial, he concluded, it would have to look beyond modernity, beyond Western culture, and even beyond written history for religious guidance. "Perhaps the truth," he suggested, "lies in what most of the world outside the modern West has always believed."

If Émile Durkheim helped Bellah understand American ideals, the German sociologist Max Weber helped him confront American realities. Bellah's deepest criticism of individualism was that it undermined the very conditions that make it possible. Its vision of human beings as free to choose their own identities and commitments had not brought about a more creative or reflective society. It had resulted in people who were lonely, disoriented, and servile to the power of markets, states, and public opinion. Weber called this condition the "iron cage" of modernity. It was a "masterless slavery," he explained, because it was enforced through the power of impersonal rules and bureaucracies that fused state and market into a single system. But it was also a world of our own making—indeed, as Weber demonstrated, the "iron cage" was built on the values of bourgeois individualism.

In the last two decades of his life, Bellah explored ways to escape this ideological prison while still preserving democratic values. The great question of our time, he proposed, "is whether we can control the very economic and technical forces, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us." In a controversial 1998 article, "Is There a Common American Culture?," Bellah argued that American culture was threatened by a "monoculture" that diminished its ability to imagine alterna-

tive ways of life. Its embrace of "diversity" promoted the just treatment of minorities, but it also concealed the hegemony of a technocratic liberalism that strips us of any shared morality other than that of market exchange. Weber himself believed the "iron cage" could not be escaped, finding no tenable place for virtue ethics in an amoral world of power politics and capitalism. He saw no solution to the tragic paradox that the highest achievement of Western culture, its all-embracing rationalism, was also the source of its fatal disenchantment. Bellah did not share Weber's fatalism, but he did share his interest in archaic religion. It was there, in the remote prehistory of our species, that Bellah found guidance for the future.

Religion in Human Evolution was the book Bellah lived to write, and he died not long after it was published to wide acclaim in 2011. It stands as his final and most expansive interpretation of the problem of modernity and religion, which had first drawn him to the study of sociology in the 1940s. The eight-hundred-page work is impossible to summarize, impossible even for a single reviewer to competently evaluate. It is best understood as belonging to the genre of modernity criticism, and best read alongside Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, and Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*. This might seem odd advice about a book whose history ends in the fourth century BC, and which expends enormous scholarly energy in imagining the vanished worlds of religions for which we have no written records. But Bellah's "autobiography of the human race," as he called his big book, was not simply a work of historical reconstruction. Its ambition was to offer a new interpretation of modernity, by viewing it from the longest historical perspective possible.

By evolution, Bellah did not mean simply biological evolution. He also meant the evolution of culture, the process through which human beings actively cooperate in their own transformation. As Bellah told it, the history of our species is the story of its expanding capacities for language and culture, capacities that enhanced our ability to cooperate with and learn from one another. Human beings are uniquely "self-domesticating." Not only did we evolve in ways that improved our fitness for survival and reproduction. More astonishingly, we nurtured capacities that freed us from selective pressures, allowing us to form families, societies, and eventually institutions that offer shelter from the grim competition for life and resources. The key to understanding our species, Bellah argued, is found in our ability to create these "relaxed spaces," where distinctly human abilities—for reflection, love, creativity, and play—have the freedom to flourish.

At the heart of *Religion and Human Evolution* is an account of how our species evolved to live in "multiple realities." What Bellah called "everyday life" is the world of work and survival, in which we understand reality through our immediate biological and material needs. Although this dimension of life might seem uniquely real, it is not. Bellah's most important claim was this: *no one can live in the world of everyday life all the time*. Essential to every human life and society is our capacity to escape this brute reality—to transcend the domain of animal immediacy and instrumental reasoning. We leave the world of everyday life whenever we enter spheres of life that are not dominated by evolutionary pressures, and we do so frequently. Beginning in infancy and ending only near death, our lives are punctuated by "play." Games are play, but so are conversations, social rituals, novels, songs, paintings, and religion. "In some important sense," Bellah wrote, "we never leave childhood."

Bellah's picture of history is shaped by his claim that religion emerged from what historian Johan Huizinga called "the primeval soil of play." To say that religion is the highest form of play does not mean religion is unserious—it simply means it is the opposite of work. *Religion and Human Evolution* chronicled the emergence of religion in tribal and archaic societies up to its transformation in the Axial Age. Drawing on work in archeology, anthropology, and evolutionary psychology, Bellah contended that at each stage of cultural evolution, religion integrated societies into an ordered unity. In its most primitive stages, it did so not by priestly rule or by prescribing beliefs about gods or God (features of religion that developed only later, Bellah speculated). Instead, it did so by ritual, the founding action of the first human societies. Ritual makes society. In ritual, we transcend everyday life by participating in an action expressed in common symbols and gestures. We enact a vision of the social world as it is "meant to be," overcoming, if only for a moment, group envy, competition, and strife. "Only ritual pulls us out of our egoistic pursuit of our own interests and creates the possibility of a social world."

The great thinkers of the Axial Age fundamentally altered archaic religion, marking a watershed in cultural evolution. Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Mencius, Buddha, and the Jewish prophets—Bellah's sprawling book shows how each of these figures introduced a radically new element into cultures previously governed by the holy repetitions of ritual and myth. The "birth of criticism" enabled human beings, for the first time, to put into serious question the authority of traditional ways of life. Stories, laws, and rituals could now be judged from a higher and more universal order of values. Human beings also began to develop second-order thinking skills, eventually coming to see themselves as having identities and agency of their own. Bellah's ambivalent verdict on the Axial Age set the stage for his interpretation of modernity. He praised Axial thinkers for raising human moral consciousness and for opening archaic societies to rational evaluation. But he also lamented its long-term influence on Western culture, which began to uproot human rationality from its embeddedness in relationships of trust and dependency.

Bellah saw modernity as an attempt to free human knowledge from its primordial basis in ritual, symbol, and narrative. He never denied its advances, but he feared that they had come at heavy costs, both to our humanity and to the natural environment. In Bellah's telling, modernity's story was tragic. We built the

What our culture conspicuously lacks are those rituals that humanize any society—rituals that interrupt everyday life, break up mundane patterns of perception, and elevate us above the profane world of survival, rivalry, and acquisition.

modern world for purposes that we had consciously chosen: for peace, for comfort, for efficiency, for a reduction of suffering, and, above all, for an expansion of individual autonomy. But in working to make that world a reality, we lost control over the institutions and ideas that sustain it, suffering degradation by the very system that was supposed to empower us. Bellah argued this is as much a cultural catastrophe as an economic or environmental crisis. Human beings find meaning only by living in "multiple realities," flourishing in those human sanctuaries where thought, creativity, friendship, love, and worship are nurtured and expressed. But today we are mentally trapped by the logic of competitive life, living as functionaries in a world where it seems nothing is leisure, everything is work, and the boundaries protecting the sacred from the profane are being erased every day.

Though Bellah preferred the language of sociology, he often described this condition in a Christian idiom. Our inordinate desire to possess and control, our *libido dominandi*, has been "externalized into structures that take on a life of their own, become like monsters, and are no longer servants of our wishes but dominate, control, and subjugate us." In his final years, Bellah's theological views subtly changed. He spoke less often of Paul Tillich and the Social Gospel movement and more frequently of postliberal theologians like George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas. He agreed with the former that Christianity is a "cultural-linguistic" system into which believers are initiated through practice and imitation; he affirmed with the latter that Christian life bears witness to a radical form of community. Bellah's postliberal turn explained the advice he routinely gave to secular students when they asked him for religious guidance. "I say not to worry about believing in God," he recalled. "I tell them that if they become part of the life of the church they will begin to see how the word is used and what it means."

Bellah's writings cut across academic disciplines, historical epochs, and religious traditions. But they always carry the paradoxical message that human beings cannot reach the deepest sources of truth and value through abstract reason. Today we often assume that knowledge requires theory, theory requires abstraction, and abstraction requires separating cognition from outside influences. If this method is essential for grasping the laws of nature, Bellah believed, it has proven a failure for guiding the higher life of humanity. His critique of modern life was that it had inverted the proper hierarchy between reason and ritual. It had wrongly assumed that ritual actions are an impediment to reaching the highest truths rather than the royal road to them.

Bellah believed that we stand at the end of an epoch, now two and a half millennia old, that has been relentlessly anti-ritualistic. This impulse was expressed in the Axial Age, quickened in the Reformation and Enlightenment, and valorized in the ideals of Western individualism. Bellah excelled at showing the many ways that rituals and symbols continue to suffuse American life. But what our culture conspicuously lacks, he argued, are those rituals that humanize any society—rituals that interrupt everyday life, break up mundane patterns of perception, and elevate us above the profane world of survival, rivalry, and acquisition. Bellah had little interest in traditional theological debates and often said that non-Christian traditions were also worthy of belief. But he placed his hope in religious communities, both Christian and non-Christian, that preserved a truth as old as society—that there are truths so transformative that they can be understood only by being enacted.

Bellah envisioned two possible futures for America. In one, the intertwined systems of market and state will continue to colonize what remains of the human "lifeworld," leaving Americans with diminished capacities to transcend the secular structures over which they have little control. In another, Americans will awaken again to the multiple realities of human life and commit to building protective bulwarks around the "relaxed zones" of culture and cult. Bellah placed little hope in progressive activism, which he thought was too much influenced by a deconstructive attitude of critique. "Criticism alone cannot give us solidarity or meaning," he wrote. Human beings need to do more than demand the freedom or power they are individually denied. No less than their earliest ancestors, they need meanings found only by relinquishing the desire to control or possess. For Bellah, this kind of community was enacted in a ritual of the most intense symbolic realism. As he put it in a sermon delivered on All Saints Day:

> I want to remind you that it is in the Eucharist that it all comes together: with all the company of heaven, the communion of the saints, and of all souls, all enfolded in one time, time out of time, all equally present—past, future, and to come. Nunc stans, the eternal now. That is what happens in that moment when the sacred is embodied in human community.… It is in and through the Eucharist that we can understand the real meaning of time and death, of those who have gone before us, those who are with us now, and those who are to come.

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THE SECOND PERILOUS MYSTERY

Lawrence Dugan

"Tunc Jesus ductus est in desertum a Spiritu, ut tentaretur a Diabolo." Matthew, 4:1

Most of the great painters never saw Palestine,
Nor any desert, and even Sicily in July
Was full of life; but the voice of a desert bird
Was a cry in the wilderness, to the wilderness,
Striking the rocks and cliffs,
Which, hearing nothing, send it back to the sky.
And every stranger is a surprise in the desert,
For the red monuments of Utah,
And the black caves of Syria,
And the peaks of Atlas that once supported the world,
Are less astonishing than a single person,
Just one man, appearing
Out of nowhere, the sight of him.

At first his body is wavering like a flame
In the heat, long before
His face can be seen. Suddenly
It's not a desert anymore, no longer a solitude
Left behind by the weather, unmapped, empty,
Left deserted by a vanished, unknown people;
But the face of the earth that a man walks over,
Making tracks in the dust, filling the emptiness
With every step he takes.
Except that the walker has no shadow.
He says that all the kingdoms of the earth are his,
But who believes a man who doesn't have a shadow?
And in what a desert must such a spirit dwell.

LAWRENCE DUGAN'*s book* The Sea Again: Poems *will be published in July by Finishing Line Press.*

Two Roads Home

Peter Schwendener

I prefer the one less traveled. It makes a difference.

I-94 is the highway that runs almost straight from Chicago to my hometown of Okemos, Michigan. When we go there to visit my ninety-four-year-old father, my wife and daughter insist on it because it's the quickest way. I always argue for M-60, which takes longer and which they mockingly call the scenic route. They always win, and celebrate their victory by making me eat at a Cracker Barrel.

Occasionally, however, I drive to Okemos alone and desert the smooth textures of I-94 for the abandoned buildings, broken glass, and gentlemen's clubs that line US 12, the arterial highway that runs east through Gary, Indiana, and abruptly converts (in summer, at least) to a lyrically beautiful pathway through the Indiana Dunes National Park. Around the town of Niles, Michigan, US 12 almost imperceptibly melts into M-60, a trunkline highway built in 1919. The lanes dwindle to a single strip, and for the next hundred miles it's all trees and fields punctuated by rivers and small towns.

I-94 reduces things to a featureless blur or sets them at an invisible distance. It's like driving in a video game or some other virtual space. M-60 presses everything against the windshield. The difference between the two roads is more than efficiency versus local color. They represent two kinds of driving experience, the abstract and the concrete. M-60 is littered with things, and I-94 has been mostly swept clean.

The roadside clutter of M-60 is previewed before you get there by the slow crawl out of Indiana through steel mills, casinos, and firecracker stores, the latter mostly owned by someone named Krazy Kaplan. The other billboards are for pot dispensaries and personal-injury lawyers. There is a brick-and-mortar adult bookstore oddly named The Lion's Den, surely among the last of its kind. This is still US 12, much of which runs through swampland whose deep haze in summer makes everything feel underwater. The strip clubs, casinos, and derelict buildings rise from the mist like some Lost Kingdom of Vice. It is in many ways more fascinating than M-60, which is overwhelmingly rural and often bucolic.

Exactly where in Michigan M-60 starts is a little confusing because, according to my father, parts of it have moved or been abolished over the decades. It used to run straight through his hometown of Union City, for example, but now runs along the town's northern edge. Long stretches of it run beside train tracks. I went looking for its western starting point and found myself in a nondescript wooded area on something called "Old M-60," which was only a few yards long and didn't make sense. It becomes unmistakably itself around the town of Cassopolis, where there is a small lake. From that point it moves in and out of cornfields to become the main street of many towns including Jones, Three Rivers, Mendon, Tekonsha, and Homer.

The pathway of vice and misery out of Indiana is lively and full of interest, and M-60 can be, by comparison, a letdown. It's quiet, unadorned, conventionally beautiful, and not a little sad. Its houses, stores, and other buildings are not picturesque and resist idealization. Occasionally there is a boarded-up house with "Keep Out" signs, but the decay is mostly understated. These all are, or were, farming towns, and though giant sprinklers and other machines are still in the fields, the energy that brought them into existence seems to have gone elsewhere.

This is Branch County, the part of Michigan where both of my parents grew up. Union City, my father's town, once had a cement factory that mined nearby lakes for marl, but like everything else here, its roots are in farming. The word "union" in its name refers to the local confluence of two rivers of vastly unequal lengths, the Coldwater (14 miles) and the St. Joseph (206 miles). My mother is from the nearby county seat of Coldwater, whose distance from Union City is roughly that of its river.

Both places contrast strongly with the commuter suburb of Okemos, Michigan, where my father moved over sixty years ago when he started to practice law in Lansing. Okemos belongs to the shallow world of the recent past and my own upbringing. The towns along M-60 are relics of a world that started to fall apart around 1957, when I was born. Unlike the suburbs, they didn't have the nineteenth century decisively knocked out of them until the 1960s, and probably not even then.

A sign for U.S. 12 in the town of Ypsilanti, Michigan

DWIGHT BURDETTE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Most of the M-60 towns look wrecked, at least from the road, but Union City is an exception. My own sense of it is heavily layered because of my father, who never left it mentally and is full of astonishingly exact details about every inch of it. On top of that, I spent a lot of time there as a child when my grandparents were still alive. Now I relate to it as a tourist. In that guise, I sometimes pull off M-60 onto Division Street, the town's main drag as well as the street on which my grandparents' house still stands. M-60 runs past a green Victorian house where my father took his first piano lessons from a Mrs. Hamilton. I have the method book they used, among whose pages is a drawing titled "The Road to the Classics." In that drawing two children stand at the foot of a winding path that leads past various obstacles to a literally shining temple emblazoned with the names of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and other masters. The obstacles that lurk by their path, all capitalized, are The Valley of Laziness, The Forest of Poor Music, and The Swamp of Jazz. Parts of M-60 are just as boring as I-94, yet unlike the latter it belongs to the world of that book, whose author felt comfortable comparing piano lessons to an arduous spiritual pilgrimage.

The house where my father undertook this pilgrimage at the family piano has a large front yard into which its current owner has sunk a swimming pool. Like M-60, it has undergone some modifications but is still recognizably the place where the nineteenth century laid cruel hands on me and my two brothers in the form of ritualistic Sunday dinners. I have tried and failed to make others understand what these were like. If they occurred in any season but summer I don't remember, because summer pushed them to the limit. At regular intervals during July and August, a baked ham would appear in the dining room, whose thick windows (no longer there) focused the sun's rays on the already blazing ham, bringing the small room's temperature to what felt like 145 degrees. It was the era not only of Sunday dinners but of mandatory church attendance, and we wore thick wool suits. This took place in a house filled with thick carpeting, heavy Teutonic furniture, and the slow, brutal ticking of a large clock.

Union City had a hushed, rural atmosphere. According to my father, churches in small towns still pulled moral weight when he was growing up. Whether this is true or not, I always experienced it as a solemn, almost religious place in comparison to Coldwater, where my mother (who died two years ago) was born. Coldwater was also spiritually annexed to the nineteenth century, but the grandparents there had a cottage on a lake, which made all the difference. Compared with Union City, it was a place of neopagan revelry. My mother's father loved circuses and collected circus memorabilia, including hideous daguerreotypes of "prodigies of nature" and other sideshow attractions. He knew clowns and acrobats from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and drove to the airport in South Bend to meet their planes. The retired owner of a steam laundry, he chain-smoked in his bathrobe in front of the TV, drawing (he was a talented artist) or doing crossword puzzles. The sixties were hard on him, and like all my grandparents, he worshipped the Lawrence Welk Show because it supplied the only remaining images in the culture of well-groomed young people.

The cultural divide between what I would call the worlds of I-94 and M-60 widened during my adolescence. Okemos, where I grew up, is only about seventy miles from the parental small towns, but they started to feel like the dark side of the moon. With the full blessing of his parents, my father ran away from Union City when he was sixteen to enroll in what he justly thought was a better high school in Ann Arbor. His hometown gave him something concrete to rebel against. I had nothing like that, only images from *Life* magazine and a nearby university, which led me to somewhat precociously embrace the Weathermen and Black Panthers, unaware at the time that those two groups did not think highly of each other. I checked other boxes as well, waving around a copy of Mao's Little Red Book and eventually getting kicked out of school. With their aura of having dropped from nowhere, suburbs promote "rebellion" of this kind, which, like I-94, is largely abstract.

Though often drab, the towns along M-60 are far from featureless, and manage to hang together on the road without all looking the same. Each has a discernible if minimal center, sometimes no more than a gas station or tiny retail strip. Their economies close to the road look downbeat, but there are pockets of prosperity, as in Three Rivers, which harbors a small Jungian community. In their reduced circumstances they still contrive to mean something. Okemos itself was once a farming village and had, until recently, a ghostly "four corners" where there was a barbershop, a diner, an ice-cream parlor, and other backward-looking establishments. Only the barbershop remains, and the four corners are being erased by the encroaching sprawl. When the first mall came to Okemos around 1970 I found it thrilling and cosmopolitan. It's still there, but now even its contours are blurred, making it just another large building.

I was in Union City with my family for its centennial in 1966. Broadway Avenue runs through its small downtown before dropping abruptly to a riverside park where a stone bench bears an inscription honoring my grandmother. The local terrain is uneven, full of hills and ravines that make it feel more like Wisconsin than Michigan. We must have brought my bicycle from Okemos for the centennial, as I recall racing down a hill that day on an elevated sidewalk, hitting a rock and plunging like Evel Knievel into somebody's garden. I was unharmed by the fall, just as I was unaware of any real difference between Union City and the rest of the world.

Though they must be subject to zoning, cemeteries seem to appear unannounced throughout this region, cropping up on hills, running in small patches along M-60, or fenced in beside cornfields. Churches may have lost the moral authority my father remembers, but they still cast a stronger spell

here than elsewhere. Curiously, the fundamentalist and Bible churches along M-60 do not look as integrated with their surroundings as the probably under-attended Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian churches. The latter are part of a vanished world that still resonates, but the others are traceable, even architecturally, to a world no older than Billy Graham. The Methodist and other older mainstays of small-town life belonged to this world, and the rough-looking Gospel tabernacles, like the shiny megachurch visible from I-94 near the town of St. Joseph, belong only to eternity.

A strange drama took place a long time ago on some country roads near Union City and Coldwater. It involved four churches that somehow found themselves on each corner of an intersection. They got along for a short time before doctrinal conflicts arose and developed to the point of acrimony. Old churches around Branch County are classically beautiful, often solid white and fragile-looking with a solitary stained-glass window sitting like a jewel near the roof of one side. The ruins of one of the original four are still there, facing a newish church that stands on the ruins of another. The other two corners are now empty. When the original four churches were on the verge of killing each other, an itinerant evangelist came to town and read them all the riot act. "I hear this is known as God's Corner," he is said to have cried from the back of a wagon, "but I tell you it's No God's Corner!"—which became its name, though one unlikely to go on a historical marker.

The aura of the nineteenth century becomes more than an aura when you stray or deliberately venture into Amish territory, a self-regulating imperium along miles of dirt roads. Toward the "English" (their name for outsiders) they are always—though never effusively—friendly, waving at cars from horse carriages, roadside stands, or front yards, which might be shared with animals. Old-growth trees and forests accompany their dirt roads, as they do much of M-60. These roads tunnel into deep woods where I once surprised an almost human-sized turkey vulture feasting on something from which it was barely distracted by my car. The woods along I-94 are a peripheral blur, though occasionally a huge dead tree appears alone like the preacher at No God's Corner, raising its blasted limbs near a travel plaza.

Though I pretend otherwise as a matter of principle, I-94 is not so bad if I'm on it with my family. My wife sleeps peacefully and my daughter reads or watches movies. We have evolved shared rituals, such as stopping at Speedway for junk food. I hardly notice what they get because I am intent on Dunkin' Stix, a Hostess product whose ingredients include nothing made by God. I wash them down with coffee that is surprisingly good. Otherwise, inedibility is the only point at which the two roads merge. There is no good food on either I-94 or M-60, with the exception of a small burger place in Homer.

Bodies of water such as lakes and rivers do not interact much with I-94, but along M-60 the presence of water starts with the Indiana swamplands and shapes everything including the names of Union City, Three Rivers, and, for that matter, Coldwater and the rest of Branch County. Because the Union City grandparents didn't own a cottage, I underestimated until recently how much sheer water there is everywhere. Fishing, according to my father, was the real religion when he was a boy, and its cult was incarnated in a local character named Skinny Bullock. This man used almost occult methods to ensnare his prey, such as lowering a severed cow's head attached to a buoy into a lake and visiting the spot at night when the revolting lure would be swarming with fish. He invited my father to accompany him on one of these night visits, but got so drunk he forgot where he had pitched the buoy and parked the boat in shallow water where he got out, beer can in one hand and sharp stick in the other, and got lost trying to spear frogs. My father conveys stories like this in a style opposite to that of the practiced raconteur, which gives them the eerily naturalistic quality of grainy film footage.

The last time I was in Union City, the Coldwater River, which runs along city limits, was fast and almost at bridge level. Its urgency jarred with the town's usual quiet. It flows not far from a tavern called "The Bucket," which is over a century old and was known in the days of Skinny Bullock (who probably spent a lot of time there) as "The Bloody Bucket" in tribute to almost nightly brawls ("bucket of blood" is one of many generic terms for a rough drinking establishment). Bar brawls also marked the nearby town of Hodunk, especially on Saturday nights when farmers and their sons were in town after a day of haggling with local feed-store owners. Not far away the Coldwater forms its "union" with the St. Joseph River, on which my father used to float in a homemade kayak over whose gunwale he laid a plywood desk so he could read if the current wasn't too swift.

Questions of personal character aside, big cities and very small towns seem to be the only points of origin in America that confer status, or rather seriousness, on a person. It's good to be from Manhattan and good, if not better, to be from Winesburg, Ohio, or Union City—but not so good, all things considered, to be from where I'm from. Long stretches of M-60 run beside train tracks that remind me of Chicago, where I moved long ago hoping my origins would move with me. Because of their speed, trains are better than cars at measuring cultural as well as psychological distance, a fact of which Theodore Dreiser takes full advantage in the opening pages of *Sister Carrie*, where he describes his heroine rolling slowly out of small-town Wisconsin toward Chicago. Something of this sense of traversing cultural as well as literal distance adheres to taking M-60 to see my father. I-94 erases everything but the destination, and M-60 slowly recapitulates his past, which by way of a long detour is also mine.

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No One Is in Control

M. Anthony Mills

What an 1878 epidemic can teach us about expertise

In 1878, a wave of yellow fever swept through the American South and spread out through the Mississippi River Valley. Along with cholera, "yellow jack," as it was known—after the yellow quarantine flags displayed on ships afflicted by the contagion—had long been a scourge of the American South. As far back as the 1790s, Congress considered, but never implemented, a national quarantine system in response to a yellow-fever outbreak early in the decade.

This time was different. Aided by modern transportation—steamboats and railroads—yellow fever spread all the way into the lower Midwest and parts of the Northeast, killing thousands of Americans and sending many more fleeing inland and north. The disease rent communities, overwhelmed local infrastructures, and disrupted the economy of the entire nation. The considerable death toll and social and economic disruption forced a transformation of the politics and policies of public health—establishing a new institutional basis for scientific and medical expertise in the federal government and prompting political backlash against an emerging technical-bureaucratic elite.

The result was a fragile partnership between science and government, which laid the groundwork for many of the institutions familiar to us today. But this partnership enshrined, rather than resolved, the political tensions that underlay the country's response to yellow fever—tensions that have come to the surface again during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we emerge from the worst pandemic of the last hundred years and try to make sense of, and learn from, our collective experience of crisis, the similarities between the yellow-fever epidemic of 1878 and the coronavirus pandemic are of more than mere historical interest. By placing today's crisis and politics in historical context, we are able to see that the standard explanations of what went wrong during our own pandemic miss the mark. COVID-19 was not a disaster because of the unchecked power of experts, nor because we simply failed to "follow the science." Both explanations exaggerate to the point of falsity the importance of technical expertise in our political life.

The United States of 1878 was, of course, a very different country. There were essentially no federal mechanisms for regulating the economy or providing many of the public goods and services we now take for granted. There were no federal institutions devoted to protecting public health or regulating drugs and medicines. There was no formal system of science advice in government, nor for funding scientific research in universities. The modern research university itself was only just emerging. Medical science was in its infancy. There was no biomedical industry to speak of. The country had one small industrial research laboratory, founded two years before by Thomas Edison.

Contrast this state of affairs with what took place 142 years later: on January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that a novel coronavirus was the etiologic agent behind a new disease first identified in Wuhan, China. The next day, the genetic makeup of the virus, later named SARS-CoV-2, was made publicly available on the internet. By the time governments began implementing "lockdown" policies, vast teams of researchers in both academia and the private sector were already cooperating with federal authorities to develop and deploy genetic-based diagnostic tests and vaccines for COVID-19.

Yet despite these considerable differences, the last several decades of the nineteenth century were marked by profound social, political, demographic, and economic upheaval much like what we see today. Then, as now, the country was riven by political, geographical, and racial conflict; frayed by distrust and animosity; and disoriented by rapid scientific, medical, technological, and demographic change.

Even more surprising—and disturbing, given the astonishing scientific and medical progress that has taken place since 1878—are the many similarities in how the country responded to the yellow fever and COVID-19 outbreaks. In both 1878 and 2020, experts, social reformers, and their political allies bemoaned the inefficiency of America's decentralized and multilayered political system, pressing for a unitary national response with expanded federal pow-

ers and attendant institutional innovations. They also saw the crisis as an opportunity to implement long-sought-for social and political reforms. In 1878, the culmination of the reform effort was the creation of a National Board of Health. Although short lived, it nevertheless set an important precedent for federal involvement in public health and medical research, and provided a model for future partnerships between science and government.

Aligned against this movement, in both 1878 and 2020, were many politicians and large swaths of the public who saw these efforts as a ploy by coastal elites to consolidate power. Rather than nationalizing public health, their arguments went, we should be wary of expanding the powers of the state and protect individual freedom instead, adapting policies to the particularities of local circumstances and needs.

This history reveals that the social and political dynamics of infectious-disease outbreaks are surprisingly persistent over time—and surprisingly impervious to the scientific and medical progress our country has enjoyed over the past century and a half. This, of course, does not mean that scientific and medical progress and expertise are unimportant, especially when it comes to protecting public health. On the contrary, the outsized role that technical expertise has come to play in our public life is one of the distinctive features of modern society—something that clearly differentiates our world from that of 1878. But this fact makes it all too easy to exaggerate the importance of such expertise in understanding the complex social and political dynamics engendered by crises such as epidemics.

An 1878 illustration of a volunteer physician from the Howard Association on rounds during the Memphis outbreak.

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As yellow jack ravaged the South in 1878, many fled northward into neighboring towns, cities, and states, precipitating a refugee crisis. In inland Memphis—where about half the population was infected with yellow fever and more than 10 percent of its residents were killed—thousands of "terrified inhabitants fled the city," resulting in the complete collapse of the city's municipal government.

The populations of uninfected regions swelled with epidemic refugees seeking safety, pushing local resources past their limits. Those who fled the contagion were often met by "shotgun quarantines"—vigilante groups of armed citizens enforcing local or impromptu quarantines with double-barreled shotguns. Denied shelter or provisions, many epidemic refugees died, if not of the disease, then of starvation or exposure.

Officials were not entirely defenseless. In the wake of past epidemics, many southern states had established state and local boards for public-health policy. But, besides lacking coordination, state and local health boards varied widely in their capacities. Most had no authority or money to impose quarantines and could only advise local lawmakers about the best course of action. Some were perceived to be untrustworthy, if not corrupt—liable to downplay or hide evidence of new outbreaks. In some states, such as Mississippi, quarantine authority was highly localized—a patchwork of policies that were enforced by local volunteers, often at gunpoint. Where they were enforced, quarantines were routinely violated by citizens who found them unduly burdensome or were trying to flee disease.

In a familiar dynamic, the tension between public health and economic freedom shaped the political debates surrounding yellow fever. State and local health boards saw it as their task to strike a balance between protecting public health and minimizing disruption to local commerce. Representatives from local industry were typically included as advisors, and boards were sometimes accused of being beholden to business interests, especially in coastal regions heavily dependent on the free flow of commerce through southern ports and waterways. The stakes were high on both sides: inadequate health measures meant the uncontained spread of a virulent disease, while strict quarantines, including travel restrictions, could mean economic ruin.

At stake was more than commerce, however. As historian Howard Kramer observes, many quarantined people were "summarily ejected from their homes," with "streets and whole sections of towns…blocked off," while "inter-

course with other infected communities" was "absolutely forbidden." School openings were delayed in some locales, first until October—on the optimistic assumption that the epidemic would soon abate—then until November, and in some instances indefinitely. Voter turnout for the midterm election was severely reduced in some southern counties. There were supply-chain disruptions, creating food insecurity in various locales.

Adding to the confusion was the fact that experts did not agree about the best means of containing the disease. There were multiple competing theories about the causes of disease. Though the bacteriological revolution was underway in Europe, it was only beginning to influence medical opinion in the United States. One prominent American physician of the period dismissed the germ theory as "this terribly fatal pseudo-science of men who study disease in cap and gown."

The older miasma theory remained popular. Defenders of this theory—known as "anti-contagionists"—pointed to unsanitary environmental circumstances as the primary source of disease. They emphasized the need to improve local sanitary conditions and hygiene practices, especially among the poor and uneducated. The "contagionist" view, which was increasingly favored by 1878, pointed to the obvious "portability" of yellow fever and emphasized quarantines and travel restrictions as the best means for containing disease. For its part, the public simply took it for granted that yellow fever was contagious, shunning the afflicted and fleeing disease-ridden communities.

Desperate for a semblance of control, many politicians looked to quarantines as a blunt but effective tool for containing disease, but experts remained divided over the issue. Some contended that quarantines were unworkable or unnecessary to prevent transmission, thus doing more harm than good. One group of medical experts went so far as to characterize them as "a return to the barbarous and inhuman quarantine of the dark ages." Perhaps the most common expert response was to advocate a combination of quarantine and hygienic measures—a pragmatic strategy that hedged against scientific uncertainty while bowing to conflicting political pressures.

The underlying problem was that even among those who accepted contagionism and germ theory, no one really knew *how* yellow fever was transmitted. It would be almost thirty years before Major Walter Reed and his colleagues discovered that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito was the disease vector—leading to highly effective efforts to control yellow fever by reducing mosquito populations. In 1878, however—as in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic—the leading theory was that the disease was transmitted by "fomites," inanimate objects that had been contaminated by the disease and were transported via trains, ships, and articles of clothing.

Adherents of this view recommended supplementing quarantines and travel restrictions with hygienic measures, including rigorous fumigation and harsh disinfectant procedures. In an early example of "hygiene theater," one Mississippi physician recommended that local residents disinfect everything with carbolic acid or "sulphate of iron," and urged public officials to burn soiled mattresses and boil bedding. Whatever the effectiveness of such measures, Dr. Pelaez reasoned, "perhaps the public was psychologically appeased by these recommendations."

The chaos generated by the yellow-fever epidemic of 1878 convinced a growing number of Americans that the federal government must assume a greater role in controlling infectious diseases. As President Rutherford B. Hayes put it in his 1878 State of the Union address, "the fearful spread of this pestilence has awakened a very general public sentiment in favor of national sanitary administration." This provided an opening for those reformers who had long sought a more prominent role for government in promoting public health.

Nowadays, the insinuation that experts may be taking advantage of a national crisis to implement their own pet policies or establish a greater role for themselves may arouse suspicions of right-wing paranoia in polite circles. But public-health experts in the 1870s were quite explicit about taking advantage of periodic outbreaks of infectious diseases. Outbreaks took far fewer lives in aggregate than more mundane causes—such as inadequate water supplies, malnutrition, limited medical care, and endemic diseases—but provided political opportunities to implement reforms experts believed necessary.

Indeed, "sanitarians"—as public-health experts were called—had been agitating for a centralized federal institution devoted to public health for decades, and not only to control infectious diseases. They emphasized long-term goals such as building federal infrastructure for providing expert advice, promoting public hygiene, funding medical research, and standardizing data collection. By the 1870s, calls for a national institution were growing louder, backed by the American Medical Association and the newly created American Public Health Association and National Association of State Health Commissioners.

As yellow fever broke out again in 1878, the politics were ripe for reform. Congress was once more in the midst of a heated debate over whether to nationalize quarantine powers. "[N]o seaport town having any commerce will ever adopt and adhere to any quarantine regulations which will interfere to any great extent with their commercial interest," argued Casey Young, representative from Tennessee. A national-quarantine system was necessary and justified "by the federal government's constitutional right to regulate commerce."

Opponents of a national quarantine, many of them from regions whose economic interests were threatened by the proposal, responded that quarantine "was a police power, and as such belonged to the states." They argued that quarantine powers exceeded the federal government's authority to

Outbreaks took far fewer lives in aggregate than more mundane causes, but provided political opportunities to implement reforms experts believed necessary.

regulate interstate commerce. Moreover, they contended, "a uniform quarantine law could not meet the needs of special local circumstances."

Yet, by 1878, the yellow-fever crisis had persuaded enough Americans that epidemics were, indeed, both national and economic in nature. Some from northern and inland states had felt the effects of yellow fever directly for the first time and many more were forced to confront its effects indirectly due to disrupted commerce. Responding to political pressure, Congress passed its first national-quarantine law in April 1878. The following year, it passed yet another public-health law—what came to be known as the "yellow fever bill." Backed by leading public-health reformers, the new bill created a National Board of Health—precisely the kind of institution they had long sought.

The National Board of Health consisted of eleven members appointed by the president and approved by the Senate. These included prominent medical experts from a variety of states as well as a representative of the Justice Department and medical officers from the army, the navy, and the Marine Hospital Service. The distinguished surgeon and medical reformer John Shaw Billings was tapped as director. Their charge was to investigate the nature of epidemic diseases, advise state lawmakers on best methods for their containment, and assist them in implementing public-health policies.

Reflecting the divisions within the broader expert community, the board members were divided over the underlying cause of yellow fever and the best means to control it. But they did generally agree on one thing: that the practice of quarantine was archaic and out of step with the best science of the day. Congress, however, was explicit: it vested the new institution with power over quarantine and appropriated funding for just this purpose. Somewhat reluctantly, the National Board of Health developed a plan for a modified and limited quarantine system, which included travel restrictions and emphasized hygienic measures and fumigation techniques. To help implement this new "scientific quarantine," the board sent teams of inspectors to those regions of the country where yellow fever was most prevalent. In some places, such as Memphis—which had been decimated by the 1878 epidemic—these interventions were welcomed, and local and state public-health experts eagerly collaborated with their federal colleagues. But tensions arose elsewhere, thanks to conflicting political visions in addition to disagreements over public-health policy itself.

This conflict was nowhere more apparent than in the fraught relationship between the National Board of Health and the Louisiana Board of Health. For the National Board of Health and its allies, public health was a national concern, with state and local interests acting as so many obstacles. As one sanitarian described it: it may be necessary to "place the power with those who are likely to remain free from, and above the influence of, all individual or local interests."

By contrast, Joseph Jones, the secretary of Louisiana's board, believed that public health should be protected at the local level and that quarantine authority, in particular, was the natural prerogative of states. He and his allies saw the National Board of Health as an imposing, alien force that threatened to deprive them of their right to govern themselves. A former Confederate officer, Jones characterized the board as "an inquisitorial system of espionage and detention." The local press went even further, accusing the new federal bureau of "manufacturing yellow fever in the Mississippi Valley" with a view to "frighten[ing] the national legislative body to give it more funds" and expand its influence.

Such sentiments were not confined to states' rights proponents nor even to southerners. A coalition of local and state health officials from states ranging from Georgia and Alabama to New Jersey and New York banded together to protect state quarantine authority from federal encroachment. They protested the concentration of power "in the hands of the National Board of Health, or of any other agent of the federal government."

Yet it was not resistance from states' rights advocates that caused the biggest problems for the National Board of Health. On the contrary, the clash that would prove fatal was, perhaps ironically, one within the federal bureaucracy itself.

Congress had limited the board's existence to a period of four years, after which its authorizing legislation would have to be reenacted. In the years that followed the board's creation, Billings continually petitioned Congress for more funding, but to no avail. Congress insisted that its original appropriation of $500,000 was intended to cover the four-year period. Meanwhile, political support for the National Board of Health began to weaken, beginning with the resistance from local commercial interests. Adding to the board's troubles was the fact that, as John Duffy points out, "no major epidemics of yellow fever or Asiatic cholera occurred during the next few years, and, as memories of the 1878 outbreaks receded, so did enthusiasm for a national

public health board." Rivals within the federal bureaucracy smelled blood.

The Marine Hospital Service had long sought a role as the nation's preeminent public health institution—and had backed legislation to vest itself, rather than a new independent board, with federal quarantine powers. Its new director, John Hamilton, accused the board of fraud, waste, and incompetence. (He even attributed the death of the service's longtime director, John Woodworth, to "persecution" from the National Board of Health and its allies.) In 1883, after Congress declined to reenact its authorizing legislation, the National Board of Health was effectively shuttered. Hamilton saw to it that the board's quarantine powers and even some of its funding were transferred over to the Marine Hospital Service.

Like the board, the service's ambitions went beyond quarantine powers. A few years later, in 1886, it quietly established the Hygienic Laboratory in New York City—the nation's first federal laboratory for medical research, which would eventually expand its scope to cover research on chronic diseases and basic science. In the next century, the Marine Hospital Service would be renamed the U.S. Public Health Service, and its Hygienic Laboratory would grow to become the largest and most important medical research organization in the world—the National Institutes of Health.

Historians often attribute the fate of the National Board of Health to the baleful influence of economic interests, partisanship, and "know-nothing" politicians in Congress who stymied the efforts of well-meaning reformers. But one cannot ignore the role that bureaucratic conflicts played in undermining the board as well. What drove these conflicts, fundamentally, were clashing visions of the appropriate roles of both expertise and the federal government in democratic society. Rather than a resolution of this tension, the creation of the National Board of Health represented a temporary compromise. It was, for this reason, a "fragile" institution, as Robert Kohler puts it, born of political opportunism and practical need at a moment when Americans were deeply divided about the proper scope of the federal government and the role of technical experts within it.

What can we learn from the history of yellow fever? Given the prominence of technical experts in both the events of 1878 and those of 2020—not to mention today's preoccupation with "the science" (whether to demonize or deify it)—the lessons may seem counterintuitive. But the parallels show that the role of such experts is not nearly as important for understanding the dynamics engendered by epidemics as we tend to think.

On the political Right, a dominant narrative claims that our government's pandemic response was both misguided and disproportionate, driven by self-interested members of the "expert class." There are weak and strong versions of this argument, ranging from legitimate critiques of expert error or particular policies to full-blown conspiracy theories, according to which the COVID-19 crisis was manufactured by a globalist network of elites to advance their own interests at the expense of individual freedoms.

Beyond backlash against the role of experts, these critiques generally assume that pandemic policies—such as stay-at-home orders, business and school closures, or mask and vaccine mandates—were disproportionate. It follows that the policies "imposed" by "the experts" were not only ineffective or produced unintended consequences, but also that they were *unnecessary*. If so, then there must be some other—nefarious—reason why they were imposed: to advance personal interests or to assert control.

Placing COVID-19 in the context of the history of the 1878 yellow-fever epidemic allows us to see where this narrative goes astray. In 1878, as in 2020, many citizens, especially those in relatively unaffected regions of the country, protested the nationalization of public health. Some dismissed policies, such as quarantines, as more performative than effective—and could point to experts who supported their views. During both epidemics there were accusations by critics that northern elites were sensationalizing the disease to expand the influence of the federal government's expert bureaucracy. What's more, the critics were not entirely wrong—in 1878, the sanitarians *did* take advantage of the crisis to push their own agendas, for better or worse. Their goal *was* to expand the power of the federal government and wrest political control from local, state, and commercial interests.

On balance, however, the American public reacted to yellow fever not by arguing that the threat was overblown but with fear and panic. Many fled, while others sought to keep epidemic refugees out of their communities, even if it meant economic ruin. In fact, it was the public's demand for a government response that gave the sanitarians the political opening they needed to push their reforms through. And it was political support for federal intervention from southern members of Congress in particular—who were otherwise resistant to the expansion of federal powers—that ultimately paved the way for the nationalization of quarantine and the creation of the National Board of Health. Being at the front line of the epidemic, southerners had no doubt that yellow fever threatened both their health and economy, whatever their complaints about northern elites.

Here, too, there are surprising parallels to COVID-19. The data suggest that by the time political authorities—and it is worth emphasizing that these were *political* decisions, albeit informed by experts—began issuing stay-at-home orders in the spring of 2020, Americans across the country had already begun to withdraw from public life in the hopes of avoiding infection. During this first phase of the pandemic, at least, public policy tended to trail public behavior. Also as in 1878, many Americans in 2020 fled the disease for those regions that still remained relatively unaffected. And this, in turn, prompted local and state efforts to keep pandemic refugees out, or at least minimize the chance of importing disease.

If both COVID-19 and yellow fever fit this general historical pattern, then it becomes a lot harder to see how uniquely modern phenomena such as our expert bureaucracies could be blamed entirely for our mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis.

Was the public reaction to yellow fever more justified than the public reaction to COVID-19? Were we somehow duped in 2020 in a way our forebears were not in 1878? It is striking to compare the mortality statistics in this respect. Though its impact varied significantly by region, it is estimated that the 1878 yellow-fever epidemic claimed the lives of a total of twenty thousand Americans—roughly 0.04 percent of the total U.S. population at the time—over a period of about eight months. By contrast, in its first eight months, coronavirus killed 230,000 Americans, or about 0.07 percent of the total U.S. population. To date, COVID-19 has killed over 1 million Americans—or roughly 0.3 percent of the U.S. population.

Even granting significant room for error, especially given spotty historical records prior to 1900, COVID-19 was apparently a far greater risk to the nation, at least according to the crude criterion of aggregate mortality. And yet, the 1878 epidemic gave rise to mass panic and forced a transformation of the politics of public health. All this at a time when the country was far more familiar with deaths from infectious diseases, not to mention considerably higher mortality overall. What's more, yellow fever struck a nation that was far less equipped, in terms of scientific, medical, technological, and public resources, to deal with such public health threats than we are today.

This brings us to a second flawed assumption in the skeptics' narrative. If the social and political crisis caused by COVID-19 was largely the fault of self-interested experts, then it would be surprising indeed to find so many parallels between the government's responses to the epidemics of 2020 and 1878. Why? Because the United States of 1878 lacked the very institutions skeptics blame for the COVID-19 disaster: expert bureaucracies.

As seen above, the public-health experts of the day tried and to some extent succeeded in establishing such institutions and expanding their influence *in response* to the 1878 epidemic. The bureaucracies they did establish, moreover, were quite limited by contemporary standards—with staffs that numbered in the double-digits, modest and unreliable funding, and carefully delineated authorities. Whatever role experts played or sought to play in the government's response, no one could characterize the politics of the 1878 epidemic as "rule by experts."

This suggests that these dynamics may have a lot less to do with our modern expert institutions than we tend to think. This is not to deny the importance of these institutions, nor to absolve the experts (in 2020 or 1878) of all error, misbehavior, or self-interest. But epidemics of infectious diseases, it seems, have a logic of their own, which is surprisingly consistent through time.

This is confirmed by the longer history of epidemics, which, as Charles E. Rosenberg has shown, evinces a remarkably persistent pattern from ancient Greece to the present. "Like the acts in a conventionally structured play," Rosenberg writes, "the events of a classic epidemic succeed each together in predictable narrative sequence." First, doctors discover a handful of "suspicious" cases. They then "either suppress their own anxiety or report their suspicions to authorities, who are usually unenthusiastic about publicly acknowledging the presence of so dangerous an intruder." Why such reluctance? Because "to admit the presence of an epidemic disease" is always to "threaten interests," whether economic or political, and to "risk social dissolution."

The collective response only comes after "bodies accumulate," and the reality of the threat becomes undeniable. Once acknowledged, however, the public reaction flips from denial to panic: "Those who were able might be expected to flee contaminated neighborhoods, while men and women remaining in stricken communities could be expected to avoid the sick and the dying." Public authorities, desperate to reestablish order—or at least give off the appearance of control—grasp for whatever policy tools are most readily available. "Ever since the fourteenth century," Rosenberg observes, "the institution of quarantine has provided a feared yet politically compelling administrative option for communities during epidemic."

The next stage in the dramatic narrative is the collective search for a cause—whether natural, artificial, or supernatural. The public, looking for an explanation, will often settle for a scapegoat—the sinful, the poor, the uneducated, the foreigner. This search is only partially scientific—determining whether the disease has a local source or was "transported" from elsewhere, or, with Covid, whether it came from zoonotic sources or a laboratory accident. It is also a quest for meaning—an overarching narrative that can make sense of the otherwise "dismaying arbitrariness" of disease and the vulnerabilities and limits it forces us to confront.

Adding to the chaos is the fact that such crises have no identifiable endpoint, despite the suddenness with which they began. "Epidemics," observes Rosenberg in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, "end with a whimper, not a bang," as "susceptible individuals flee, die, or recover, and incidence of the disease gradually declines." The public eventually moves on, while experts struggle to determine what went wrong.

If both COVID-19 and yellow fever fit this general historical pattern, then it becomes a lot harder to see how uniquely modern phenomena, such as our expert bureaucracies—or other modern phenomena such as digital disinformation, for that matter—could be blamed entirely for our mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis. It may be psychologically comforting to think so, lending meaning to the "dismaying arbitrariness." "When threatened with an epidemic," Rosenberg concludes, "most people seek rational understanding of the phenomenon in terms that promise control, often by minimizing their own sense of vulnerability." It is much more difficult to accept the alternative—that no one really is in control.

Here we come to a second historical lesson, seemingly opposed to the first. If the skeptics exaggerate the experts' power to manipulate us and control our lives, their opponents are guilty of the same error in reverse: they exaggerate the experts' power to protect us from the vicissitudes of nature and society.

Of course, the fact that epidemics throughout history tend to follow the same general pattern does not mean that they are all identical. But discerning persistent patterns across time allows us to identify what is and is not unique about our own experience. And, clearly, one thing that makes the coronavirus pandemic so distinctive when compared to past outbreaks is the prominent role that scientific and medical expertise has played (however much skeptics may misconstrue its role in our political crises).

Indeed, one of the most obvious differences between COVID-19 and, say, the 1878 yellow-fever epidemic, is our ability to identify, understand, and combat disease—exemplified most powerfully in the rapid development and deployment of effective vaccines. Our ability to achieve such feats is due in part to the reform efforts that began in the late nineteenth century—spurred by crises like 1878—which gave rise to many of the expert institutions familiar to us today. But it is also due to astonishing advances in science, technology, and medicine since that time—advances that have enabled staggering, and at times even frightening, feats, from the moon landing to the invention of chemical and atomic weapons to the mass production of penicillin to the prospect of the first human-caused global pandemic.

But we are also, because of these same developments, susceptible to a peculiarly modern form of hubris. It is the expectation that, with enough public expenditures and political will, we can marshal the country's technical resources to solve any problem that confronts us. As Vannevar Bush—one of the architects of modern science policy—once put it, this is the "fallacy," encouraged by the "spectacular success" of organized research during World War II, that "any problem can be solved by gathering enough scientists and giving them enough money."

Implicit here is the assumption that all human challenges are, fundamentally, nothing more than technical problems to be resolved through technical means. It follows that if we are unable to solve a given problem, then there must be some irrational obstacle preventing us from doing so: human obstinance or ignorance or political intransigence. What this ideology cannot countenance is that there could be problems that are not merely technical, perhaps not solvable at all. Underlying this attitude is an article of Enlightenment faith: a belief that with enough scientific and technological progress, we can become masters of our own fate.

From this point of view, the violent recurrence of infectious-disease epidemics in our time is particularly disturbing. For it suggests that, despite all our progress since the nineteenth century, we are not as invulnerable as we like to believe. It becomes tempting, therefore, to blame our plight on someone or something—demagogues, disinformation, the uneducated. If only we "followed the science," this reasoning goes, then we could solve the problem. These follow-the-science ideologues and their skeptical critics share the same unshakeable faith in the capacity of technical experts to master reality—whether to manipulate or to save us.

The parallels between the 1878 yellow-fever epidemic and our own coronavirus pandemic should disabuse us of this belief. Despite our technical sophistication, our response to COVID-19 has been plagued by many of the very same tensions and conflicts on display in 1878—from expert error and inconsistent policy to popular backlash and political polarization.

Is this simply because we have not progressed *enough* since 1878? Of course, more scientific and technological progress would have helped us during COVID-19. And such progress likely will aid us in our effort to manage the next public-health crisis, just as the advances made since 1878 aided our response to COVID-19. But history suggests that however important it is for grappling with such crises, technical expertise, by itself, is not sufficient to resolve them. The reason is that these crises bring forth dynamics that are not merely technical in nature, but rooted in deeper social and political forces. As Thucydides long ago observed in his account of the plague of ancient Athens, it is not the disease itself, however virulent, that ultimately threatens the social order, but the lawlessness, conflict, and mutual animosity it engenders among the people.

Both the skeptics and the "follow-the-science" ideologues fail to face the intransigently complex reality that epidemics force upon us—have always forced upon us. We, of course, need experts. But they can no more deliver us from this reality than they can be blamed for all its contingency. Expertise is indispensable to understanding and confronting the complex problems that beset our society—and the global crises that, from time to time, threaten it. But, as Vannevar Bush once elegantly put it, by itself, "science is not enough."

M. ANTHONY MILLS *is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He is writing a book about the history of federal scientific institutions beginning with the 1878 yellow-fever epidemic.*

FISH

Brian Swann

The dragonfly hitches up
  mica wings, one
twitch, settles back to
  watch and wait while

trout subtle as water
  vanish in overhanging
branches to rise again
  as vortex, silt-flick

surface rip, wavelets
  rasping rocks,
replying as glass to glass
  glass through glass,

bending light to make
  a world of whispers
I hear as silence
  counter to itself

in everything that
  almost gets away.

BRIAN SWANN *'s most recent poetry collection is* Imago *(Johns Hopkins University Press), and his latest fiction is* Huskanaw *(MadHat Press). He teaches at the Cooper Union in New York City.*

Waiting on the Threshold

Stuck in shelters on the Mexican side of the border, migrants try to navigate the U.S. government's new app for asylum-seekers.

TEXT BY AGUS MORALES
PHOTOS BY NÚRIA LÓPEZ TORRES

In addition to the incomplete wall of steel bollards, the U.S.–Mexico border now has a digital wall—the CBP One app, which the U.S. government recently began using for asylum seekers in order to discourage irregular crossings. While the app has provided a legal pathway to the United States for some migrants, others have encountered problems such as error messages and system crashes, causing yet more anxiety for those seeking asylum.

Hundreds of migrants are currently waiting in shelters in Piedras Negras, Mexico. They are constantly on their cell phones—not to talk to their families, but to keep trying to secure an appointment with immigration authorities on the CBP app. For some, such as thirty-seven-year-old Cinthia Yolani Matute Cruz from Honduras, the app has become a source of distress. "This app messes with you," she says. "I'm desperate about this. Emotionally, it makes you feel really bad."

After the challenges of getting to the border, many migrants in the shelters are already desperate and exhausted. "I feel like my breath doesn't reach inside, like I can't breathe, as if my tongue is swallowing me. I have stress," says Nimrod Castillo, a thirty-one-year-old migrant from Honduras. Castillo is traveling with his wife and two daughters, who became sick during their long journey. "Nightmares don't let me sleep," he says.

Located near the border, Piedras Negras has become an important crossing point for hundreds of migrants staying in shelters and waiting for their chance to enter the United States. Many of the migrants interviewed for this story claim to have been robbed and extorted by unidentified armed men and by Mexican security forces.

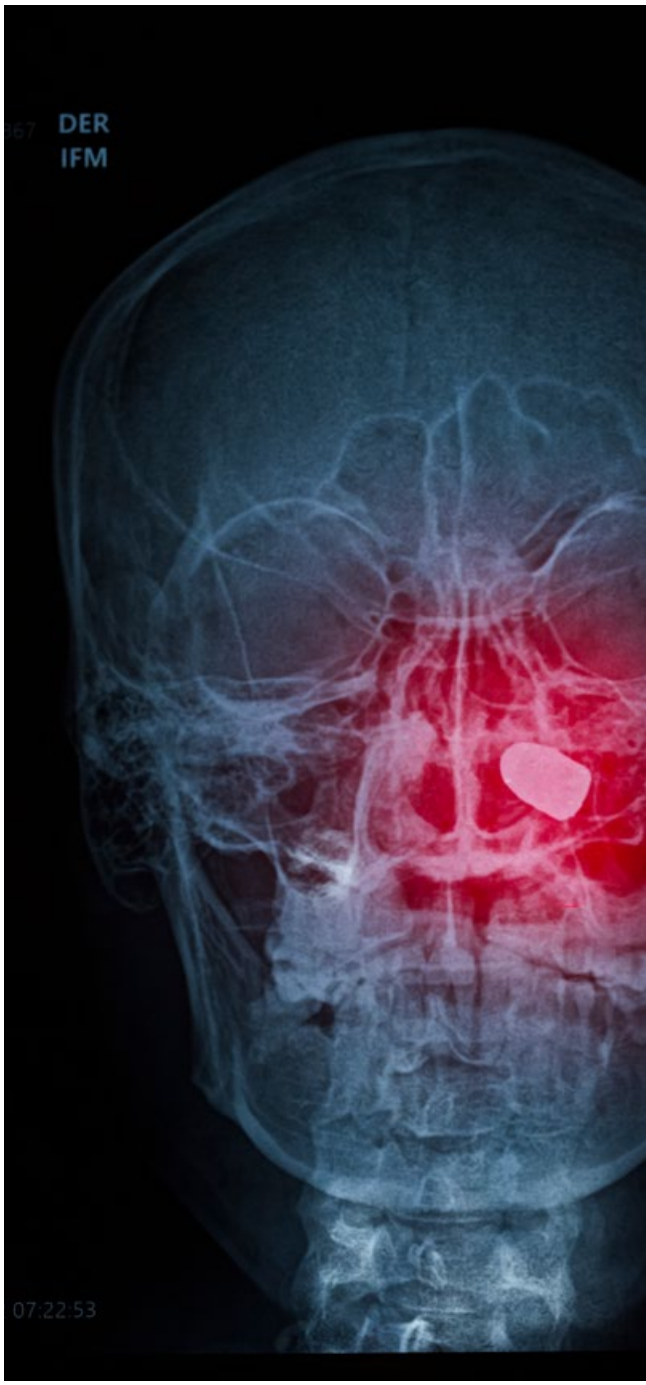
The shift in migration patterns is noticeable in Piedras Negras. While a decade ago most migrants on their way to the United States through Mexico were from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, U.S. Customs and Border Protection now encounters more people from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Haiti. Since 2014, more than 4,500 people have lost their lives at the U.S.–Mexico border. While this is not the only dangerous crossing point for migrants in the world (more than 27,000 people died in the Mediterranean Sea during the same period), the high number highlights the suffering experienced by migrants and the risks of this desert borderland.

AGUS MORALES *is the author of the book* We Are Not Refugees. *He is a journalist and editor-in-chief of* Revista 5W, *a longform magazine in Spanish.*

NÚRIA LÓPEZ TORRES *is a Spanish documentary photographer focused on human rights and women's issues.*

Ana and her family are from Honduras and have been in Piedras Negras since December 2022. Ana says the water in their encampment makes her two children sick to their stomachs and mice eat their food.


CARRERA
RACING TEAM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OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: Jop, pictured here with his son, fled from Honduras with his wife and two children after surviving an assassination attempt last year.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT: An x-ray shows the bullet still lodged in Jop's face.

ABOVE: Jop shows a news report about the attempt on his life. The image on the right shows him lying unconscious in the street with several bullet wounds.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Ana in the room she shares with other migrants at a Baptist church shelter in Piedras Negras. Her husband is working to earn some money to pay for shelter and food, but he risks being arrested by the city police, who often detain and sometimes beat migrants. Some migrants have disappeared in police custody.

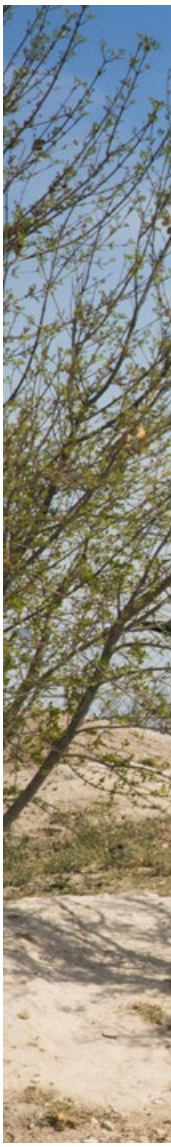
OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: Leonardo, a migrant from Venezuela, at the Baptist church shelter. Leonardo, who helps manage the shelter, earned only ten dollars a month in Venezuela, where his wife and six-year-old daughter are still living. He hopes they can join him once he's settled in the United States.

ABOVE: Children play on a slide inside the tire-built shelter at the El Rancho migrant camp where their two families live.

ABOVE: Nimrod with his wife and two daughters. Nimrod, who suffers from panic attacks, has been unable to sleep since arriving in Piedras Negras. He says the journey from Honduras was very hard. An NGO that serves Nimrod's shelter has given him medication for his physical and psychological pain.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Yanet with her husband and three children in the plastic structure that protects them from the wind and the cold. They sold everything they owned in Cuba to pay for a flight to Nicaragua and the long journey to the U.S.-Mexico border.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: A family of migrants prepares a meal at the El Rancho migrant camp on the outskirts of Piedras Negras.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: The Piedras Negras International Bridge across the Rio Grande. On the other side of the bridge is the town of Eagle Pass, Texas. Migrants who have an appointment with U.S. immigration authorities have sometimes been prevented from crossing the bridge by criminal gangs.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: Damian and Kiber from Honduras warm themselves by a fire in the El Rancho migrant camp.

ABOVE: A shelter built of old tires and plastic at the El Rancho migrant camp.

Legion of Mary

Mary Gordon

It is July 4, 1961. In three months, I will be twelve years old. John Kennedy is in the White House, and we Catholics are very, very proud. My mother says that since Kennedy has been president, she has, for the first time as a Catholic, felt like a complete American.

Before her marriage, my mother was part of a circle of working women, pious, serious, almost professional in their devoutness, who centered their religious lives (and who knows what other imaginings) around a particularly charismatic priest, with whom they made regular retreats. Her best friend among these women was Kay Costello, who had worked her way up to the position of vice president in a small New York bank, unusual for a woman of that time.

My mother had invited Kay for Fourth of July lunch and Kay asked if it would be all right if she brought one of her "Legion girls" along. She was very active in the Legion of Mary, an organization that had originated in Ireland, devoted to rescuing women who were on the wrong side of respectability, who were popularly referred to as "wayward girls." Kay's activities with the Legion were centered on women who were imprisoned on drug charges, or just getting out and trying to keep away from drugs.

One of Kay's vanities was her certainty that my mother, all of her friends, in fact, wouldn't have been able to "handle" any of the "Legion girls." With what skirted quite near condescension, she assured my mother that she knew my mother wouldn't be interested in doing the active work of the Legion, but she enrolled her as an "auxiliary member." My mother took this seriously, which meant we were committed to saying the daily Rosary and other Legion prayers, especially the Magnificat, the words Mary, pregnant with Jesus, speaks when she greets her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. She expresses her joy at the presence of the child in her womb: "My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."

To music lovers, the word "Magnificat" will probably invoke Bach or Palestrina or one of the many composers who have used the text. But to me, the immediate association is sore knees, the discomfort of kneeling on a bare wooden floor for the duration of the Rosary and the additional "Legion prayers."

My mother considered it a religious duty, one that she had no choice but to accept, to entertain one of Kay's "Legion girls."

Only now does the military suggestion of "the Legion," occur to me. Not just soldiers, but Roman soldiers, bristling with weapons, aggression, a united, violent force. I have learned from a quick Google search that the choice of names was a deliberate invocation of the Roman Legion, with its model of efficiency, the Roman association freeing the group of a local, or Irish, tinge. The local governing councils, usually housed in a parish, were called presidiums. Presidium: from the Latin meaning garrison. The name was also adopted by Russian Communists for their governing bodies.

Kay was the president of her local presidium, which met not in her own parish in Brooklyn, but in the more elegant St. Vincent Ferrer on the east side of Manhattan, which was nearer her work than the chapter connected to her Brooklyn parish. I now think it might have been an excuse for her to be away from her mother in the evenings. She lived with her mother in Park Slope, which then was heavily Irish. All the time I knew her, Kay's mother sat in a wheelchair. She prided herself on keeping alive old standards; linen napkins were used at every meal, and she made a point of telling me that she wore real—by which she meant handmade—lace at all times. She was disappointed

that her claim seemed to mean very little to me, and when we visited, she paid me no attention.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUMMER AFTERNOON—I remember now that Henry James said "summer afternoon" was the most beautiful phrase in the English language. But our house did nothing to contribute to any beauty. When my father died, my mother decided to make the house more modern, eviscerating in the process whatever small charm it had once offered. The dim, airy side porch, providing a gradual and graceful entrance, had been demolished. Replacing it: three cement steps and a black iron rail that led straight into a narrow hall abutting a bathroom with a shower and washing machine, the tiles grey, the paint above them stark white.

When we heard Kay's car drive up—the driveway was gravel and you could hear the gravel chips spin whenever tires pressed down on them—my mother sent me out to the side steps to greet our guests.

I wanted to rush out to the car and hug Kay, as I would have without thinking the year before, but I was nearly twelve, anticipating with an anxious delight the onset of puberty (I had a box of sanitary napkins in my closet *just in case* and I would take it out and hold it, like a jewel that had been willed to me but which I could not access until the moment of my majority). And so I just stayed at the steps, watching as Kay got out of the car.

Kay opened the door and came toward the steps; I was sad, as I had recently become whenever I saw Kay, that she was not good looking. Even the consolation-prize words—handsome, striking, would not apply. She was not ugly, but she had no feature that the eye would choose to fall on, although no single feature would have been thought of as "bad," except perhaps for her "complexion"—a word that seems to have disappeared from the beauty lexicon but was paramount in the fifties, as was the condition that rendered hers a problem: "enlarged pores." Her nose was a perfectly unforgettable size and shape; her mouth presented no problems; her teeth were perfectly straight and her lips neither too full nor too narrow. I have no memory of the color of her eyes; they were small and occluded by thick glasses. Her hair lacked luster; she wore it in a style that required no attention, having been cut in a generic way that suggested the hairdresser gave it no thought. I don't remember her wearing any colors but grey, white, and beige. Her hands were lovely and well cared for—her nails, short but shapely, were polished with a clear varnish. She embodied a hyper-legible virginity that, in its clarity, was only just not aggressive.

She never wore makeup; my mother at least wore lipstick and "powdered her nose," but in the seriously religious circle of my mother and her friends, attention to looks was frowned on, seen as a sign of superficiality, or worse, vanity, which among the scrupulous might be considered a venial sin. My incipient rebellion was an interest in hair and makeup; I smuggled *Seventeen* magazine and *Mademoiselle* into the house and hid them under my mattress as my male classmates might have hidden *Playboy*. I looked to them as a sailor in a fogged boat might have searched out a lighthouse. But nothing in my secret trove of magazines suggested anything that would have been any help to Kay in what was called "the looks department."

I knew that she wasn't beautiful, but I adored her. I trusted her as I trusted no other adult. She never spoke down to me and let me talk about my mother's temper (at the first sign of a flare-up, she would intervene on my behalf, and if she thought I had transgressed, she mediated the severity of the punishment). She constantly urged my mother to provide me with outings, luxuries, access to things my mother considered me too young to enjoy. Unlike Kay, my mother hadn't been to college, and she donned a humility otherwise unlike her, relying on her friend for anything that might have an impact on the life of my mind, which my mother, in a deeply touching inchoate way, respected, sharing my ambition for a larger life but knowing she had no skills to point me toward it.

I held the dog by the collar; he barked in a misleadingly menacing way when strangers approached, and we never knew who might be intimidated—perhaps the "Legion girl" might be.

"Hello, kiddo," she said, and we kissed each other on the cheek: equals. There was a pause that seemed important before the passenger door opened and "the Legion girl" got out.

But she could not have been less of a girl. There was not one single girlish thing about her. She was tall and ideally thin. Her hair was black, her dress was black, her skin was olive, her eyes were outlined in dark pencil, her eyebrows thicker than what I had, until then, believed to be correct.

The pointed toe of her stiletto pumps pierced the gravel; she straightened herself up and shook herself like a horse getting out of a stream. She straightened the skirt of her black sheath dress. She took off her sunglasses. She patted her stiff high hair, which no breeze could have disarranged.

And the atmosphere was changed, changed drastically, as if she lived inside a smoky envelope, alluring and unclear, the unclarity rendering the

clean lines of the house, the fences, and the trees inadequate, designed by someone who had been allowed primary colors only, and had never heard of shadows. She opened the envelope, inviting us to come inside, but it would be our choice and it didn't matter much to her whether or not we joined her atmosphere.

Kay laid her hand on the woman's shoulder and introduced her simply as Lisa.

I could see that my mother was frightened, and I had never before seen my mother frightened. "Take everyone into the living room," she said, as though there were a crowd, not just Kay and her friend. "I'll get lunch ready."

It was another first: my mother loathed cooking, spent as little time in the kitchen as possible, and passed on to me any duties she could that related to her grudging preparation of meals. And besides, there was nothing really to get ready. Everything had been bought at our local deli: cold cuts, potato salad, coleslaw. There would be ice cream for dessert.

When I walked in the direction of the kitchen to take up my usual role of doing most of the mealtime work, my mother said, "No. No, just talk to the guests," as if there had been a clutch of them, rather than just Kay and Lisa.

"How's your summer going, kiddo?" Kay asked.

I told her I was taking a typing class, which I assumed she knew.

My mother had insisted upon it; her contempt for men contributed to her insistence. She had told me that because I was smart, I would never marry, because men didn't like smart women. My father's early death had given her respectable cover for her insistence that I be self-supporting. She had worked happily for forty years as a legal secretary and saw no other path to security than office work.

Abashed by what I perceived as Lisa's stylishness, I desperately wished I had something better to offer as a summer's occupation, that I were a little older and could say that I was working as an assistant at a magazine or an intern at a fashion house. Even a chain gang would have been preferable to the humiliating typing class.

Lisa sat on the couch, opened her pocketbook, and took out a pack of Parliament cigarettes.

"Would you have an ashtray?" she said.

I jumped up and ran to the china cabinet. I was appalled at the ashtrays on offer: they were all perks given out by some liquor company (my uncle owned a liquor store), except for the one in the shape of a foot, which was a gift from my mother's podiatrist. I chose the least offensive of the group: a clear glass advertising some brand of vodka.

I was surprised to see Kay take out a package of cigarettes: hers were Kool.

Lisa watched Kay light up.

"You don't know how to smoke. You don't even inhale. I don't know why you even do it. Or maybe I do—it's so everyone won't think you're such a goody two-shoes. But they always will, so you shouldn't even bother, you're so bad at it. Or maybe you just do it because your mother would be so upset if she knew. I'm telling you: you are very bad at smoking."

"How can anyone be bad at smoking? Or good at it?" Kay asked.

"I happen to be very good at smoking," Lisa said.

SHE LIT A CIGARETTE, CLOSED HER EYES, took a deep inhale and blew the smoke out of her nostrils. Then she coughed, but the cough seemed theatrical, just something to mark the end of something, the transition to something new. She took another deep inhale and then blew one, two, three perfect smoke rings. And then she patted her stiff hair, stood up, straightened her skirt, and made a deep curtsy.

Kay laughed in a way that embarrassed me, because it seemed excessive, and I had never seen her excessive in anything. I could see how hard she was working to please Lisa, and I didn't want her to work that hard; I didn't think Lisa deserved it. I didn't like that she called Kay goody two-shoes, that she uncovered the dark side of Kay's relationship to her mother. But I knew I was the child in the room, and that the power in the room belonged to Lisa. I did know I was supposed to laugh, and I faked it, and disliked us all for what Lisa had made us do.

"So, Miss Kay Costello, you can just get off your high horse about my having no marketable skills. I could join the circus any time I want. I could become the Smoking Princess."

Something in the air had changed, something untamed and not benign charged it now and I was frightened, as if some powerful machine had descended from the ceiling, sucking up any good possibilities. Lisa's eyes were very hard. I had never seen such hardness in anyone's eyes, and I was no stranger to familial cruelty directed at me and my mother by her brothers and sisters. But this was something else, something more dangerous, and yet exciting as family quarrels and insults could not possibly have been.

I didn't know what I wanted to happen. What I thought should happen.

I saw that Kay hadn't even the slightest impulse to defend herself or censure Lisa. Her face was relaxed and yet ungiving. I saw that she was in command, impenetrable, in charge.

"You're getting into one of your states," she said. Smoking deliberately as a way of pausing. "Remember you haven't been out long."

Lisa turned towards me with an unnecessary velocity.

"Out. You want to know where I'm out from. Well, I'll tell you, you're old enough. Kay says you're really smart, she said you were wise beyond your years, so I'll tell you. I just got out of a hospital. A hospital for drug addicts. Junkies. It's supposed to be the best one in the world. It's in Kentucky. Lexington, Kentucky. It's very famous."

I had no idea what to say. "I'm glad you got out," I said, feeling the inadequacy of my response.

"The only good thing about it was that there were a lot of really great jazz musicians there, so there was terrific music all the time. I'm crazy about jazz. What kind of music do you like?"

She didn't know that the question of what music I liked was a very vexed one. I knew that people my age liked rock'n'roll, were supposed to like rock'n'roll, but I did not. I had only one friend and part of our bond was that she didn't like rock'n'roll either; like me, she was law abiding and comfortable with parents. We both adored musicals. It took all my moral fiber not to lord it over her that I had actually seen *West Side Story*. Every year Kay took my mother and me to see a Broadway show. Sylvia Greenburg, Kay's colleague at the bank, had advised her to try to get tickets on one of the Jewish holy days: that way you had a chance at the best seats.

I never actually told my friend; I couldn't afford to lose her. For a year, every time we were together, we would play the album of *West Side Story*; we had long ago memorized the songs and we would flip coins to see whose turn it was to be Maria and who would have to be Anita this go around. We got a transgressive pleasure from singing Anita's songs but what we really craved was being able to belt out, "I Feel Pretty."

I was relieved to be able to tell Lisa, truthfully, and with a certain pride, that I loved *West Side Story*.

"*West Side Story*, that's good, that's good," Lisa said, tapping the end of a cigarette on the dining room table. "It's good. It's real. It's about life. Not all that moon June spoon crap like most musicals."

I was terrified that Kay would let slip that I had loved *The Music Man*.

"Have you ever heard of Billie Holiday?"

I was ashamed that I hadn't, but I knew better than to try to pretend with someone like Lisa.

"Of course you haven't. I don't know why I thought you would. But I want you to."

She took a record out of the plastic bag. Sam Goody was the name on the bag.

"It was my reward for coming out here, or for something. Kay bought me these records at Sam Goody in Green Acres. She said we should come out here to Long Island because everything was cheaper…the sales tax or something."

I can't be sure what record or records Lisa took out of the bag, but in my memory, the picture on the cover shows Billie Holiday with slicked back hair, in profile. I was fascinated by the care with which Lisa handled the record. She held its outside rim with the palms of her hands, making sure that her fingers didn't touch the inside.

We had recently bought a HiFi and I was proud of its size. I would have been mortified if Lisa had to play her record on our old Victrola, which looked like a cardboard suitcase.

The susurrating sound of the record lasted a few seconds, and then there were strings.

"You're my thrill.… You do something to me."

I hadn't been sure from the picture on the cover of the record whether Billie Holiday was black or an American Indian, but from the first notes she sang, I knew. She was what we then called, thinking ourselves enlightened, a Negro.

Despite the reality of my having no real contact with black people, they had a vivid and constant presence in my imagination. Perhaps it was because I knew them only as images on television or in magazines, particularly *Life*. The only black person I had ever encountered was Jim, the school janitor, who never spoke, and I was always embarrassed when I passed him in the hall because he had had to clean up my vomit when I got sick in class, sprinkling it with a dark green powder that smelt as bad as the vomit.

But only a few months earlier, in the fall of 1960, I became obsessed with an image in *Life* magazine: a little girl, Ruby Bridges, walking alone into an elementary school in Little Rock, integrating it in the face of the mass desertion by whites, walking past the jeering, threatening white crowds. I began to fantasize about her. In my fantasy, I walk beside her; I hold her hand; I sit with her all day in school, helping her with her lessons. It is decided (I don't bother filling in the details) that she will come home and live with me. Another bed is put beside mine, and one night, we take a knife, slit the skin of our index fingers, put them together, and swear each other blood sisters.

My other fantasy is that Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole invite me to dinner in the room where they sing on Nat's TV show: it has a couch, a fireplace, a piano, and a painting of flowers. The dinner is my reward for having won an essay contest naming them the best singers in America. How I loved the two of them on that show…Ella so relaxed and good humored, Nat so elegant and suave, his cigarette smoke circling in the air in a perfect arabesque. They made me feel safe and comfortable, and yet exalted by being allowed in their company.

But on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, I see two black people who do not make me feel comfortable. Louis Armstrong embarrasses me; I want to tell him there's no need to make a clown of himself, as he does when he sings "Old Rockin' Chair's Got Me" with Jack Teagarden, pretending to cower in fear when Teagarden sings, "or I'll tan your hide," because it is clear to me as soon as he plays that he is great, and I don't know why that isn't enough for him, and I want him to stop clowning.

And I am truly frightened by Eartha Kitt, who sings a song called "Monotonous." I am convinced that she would like to use her long nails to scratch me, just because she can, because it is clear to me that she does not like anybody.

Billie Holliday is not plain scary like Eartha Kitt, but she's not comforting like Ella Fitzgerald. "You're my thrill…" and I am thrilled, but also disturbed and anxious because although the song was in English, I found it difficult to determine what the words really meant. "You're my thrill," so that must be a good thing, but what was that mocking tone behind it, as if whoever was being sung to was a fool to believe it? And then "where's my will…" didn't sound good, "strange desire" sounded dangerous, and anything like simple happiness was obviously out of the question.

LISA CLOSED HER EYES AND STARTED DANCING when the next song began. This time only a guitar accompanies Billie; her soulful voice sounds exhausted, reluctant. And when she says she longs, it's hard to believe she has the energy for longing for anyone body and soul.

Lisa stands in front of Kay, too close, and she shakes her finger too close in front of Kay's face. "Now I bet Father Dan and Sister Suzy Q or whoever gave you an A on all your report cards wouldn't like that song because you're supposed to save your soul for God. You think I don't know that kind of stuff, but I do…I went to Catholic school don't forget. And those sadist nuns and their rulers. The guards at the House of D were nothing compared to them."

I feel like I'm learning something I need to know, but I don't know what to do with the knowledge.

The next words Lisa says make me think she heard what I was saying in my mind, what I was saying about knowing, and *I* am thrilled because Lisa and I have shared a thought.

"So, the reason I love her so much, Billie, is that she knows, she knows everything, she knows about love, and she knows about hate, and she sees everything, which is why she was a junkie, because it was just too much, everything she knew, everything she saw. You don't know about heroin, why should you, but I'll tell you, it's a killer, it killed Billie it will probably kill me."

"No," Kay said. "No, you're going to kick it. I know girls that have…you know them, too."

"Yeah, they kick it and they don't. That's how I met Kay, you know that, I mean you probably know that, you have to. She'd come into the prison, with those other ones with their toothpaste and their talcum powder, but she was different, we all knew that. She got it, she got something the others didn't. What was that powder they were always bringing? Cashmere Bouquet? What a piece of crap that was."

"I probably brought Cashmere Bouquet too. It was what everybody brought."

"No, you brought Yardley's lavender. There was a picture on the can of, like, people from long ago, women in long dresses and little girls in bonnets and pinafores. I loved the smell of it: it wasn't too sweet. It was better than anything the others had. Much better. You must have known that."

She turned so she was looking straight at me, fixing me with her hard eyes. "The others, they'd bring you talcum powder and toothpaste, but Kay was there when I got out. She met me; she helped me find an apartment, she helped me find a job. It's a crap job but don't get me wrong, I'm grateful. Do you know what my job is?"

"No," I said, wondering if it was some kind of test, if it was something I was supposed to know.

"My boss is somebody Kay knows from the bank, somebody's sister, she has this little store on the Lower East Side, crappiest neighborhood in the city, but who am I to talk, some of the places I've lived. She sells underwear and stockings. So, all day long I'm putting my hand in stockings so these women can tell what shade they want. I'm not allowed to wear rings or nail polish. But I'm not complaining. It's better than working in an

office. Anything's better than typing some moron's letters all day long."

I wondered whether she'd remembered that I was taking typing that summer.

She looked at me as no one had ever looked at me before: and I felt proud of that look, proud to be on the receiving end of it.

"You need to know this, and you need not to forget it. Kay's good. I mean she's really good, not fake good, and not goody two-shoes like I said before. I just said that as a joke. I mean good. The only trouble with good people is they think they know what's good for you, and she doesn't necessarily, but she doesn't believe that. She mixes up what's good for her with what would be good for me. But I sound—well, I don't want to sound like that—ungrateful, I mean. Because I am grateful. But I'll probably let her down…she doesn't know it, but I probably will. Because at the end of the day, I'm not worth much."

I could see her becoming overwrought. Kay took her hands and held them. Lisa pulled them away with an unnecessary roughness.

"You don't get it. You don't get it. I'll let you down. I always do. I'm not worth what you do for me."

"God loves you, Lisa, and you are precious in His sight."

"Was Billie precious in His sight? She was worth a lot more than I am."

"God's ways are mysterious. She had a priest at the end, he gave her the last rites and a funeral Mass. The church was full, there were lines outside all the way to the sidewalk."

"Too little and too late," Lisa said, lighting another cigarette.

My mother came in and said we should come into the kitchen for lunch,

"No, I think we'd better be going," Kay said. "Lisa's tired. She's had a rough week."

My mother didn't try to talk her out of leaving. Not for a second, not the slightest little gesture of conciliation or regret. I was ashamed for her, and because I was her daughter, for both of us.

KAY NEVER TALKED ABOUT LISA AFTER THAT DAY, and I knew better than to ask. I don't know when I learned that Lisa had died, but I must have been in high school because my mother used the word lesbian, knowing that I understood this meaning.

"Some girl she was living with—they were involved—I mean lesbian involved—she stabbed her to death with a kitchen knife. Kay hadn't seen her for a while. She went back on drugs pretty soon. I think Kay learned a lesson from that, and a good thing in my opinion. I never liked her getting involved with that type. I was scared for her, and I'm sure they took her for a lot of money. And it was hard on her mother—she had a heart condition. I was glad when she quit the Legion."

I was too involved in my own unfolding life to think much about Lisa. But I think of her now, of all of them: Lisa, Kay, my mother, all among the dead, Lisa dying violently, my mother lingering on in a fog of dementia for five miserable years before her heart stopped, Kay dying alone with my name in the drawer of her night table, indicating that I should be called in case of emergency, although for a decade at least I rarely saw her. I had moved three hours north of New York, married, and had children. With age, she grew increasingly garrulous, her long phone calls a trial and a bore. Sometimes I would tell my husband to say I wasn't home when she called, and he—kinder, more patient than I—would listen to her with one ear as he paid bills or washed dishes.

My husband and I were the only people at Kay's funeral except for the priest who said the Mass and the nun in the parish who was a pastoral counselor, part of whose work was visiting the old and sick. She asked if there was anything of Kay's I wanted, and, looking through her apartment, there was not one thing I would have thought of bringing home. She had stripped her life to an anonymous bareness—I suppose I could have taken the crucifix that hung over her bed, but I asked the nun if she would like it and she said yes.

"I wish she'd been able to get more comfort from her faith in her last years," the nun said. "She was a sad old woman. Bitter. Very much alone."

I learned that Kay had left all her money to the Church.

It is another beautiful summer day. Today I am wondering why Kay brought Lisa to see us. Nothing about us—me, my mother, our house—would have been of the slightest interest to her.

I think Kay did it for me. I think she wanted me to see something, something that she knew was real and central to the truth of things, something she didn't want for herself, but that she thought might contain possibilities for me, something she could only approach wearing the gilded armor of a Legionnaire.

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

Something Greater

An interview with April Bernard

Anthony Domestico

At one point in her sixth and latest collection of poetry, The World Behind the World, *April Bernard writes that "almost nothing is so terrible it cannot // also be of interest." These lines are honest: it's "almost nothing," not nothing; it's "of interest," not good. But they also show Bernard's sense that, as she writes in an earlier collection, amid "all this brawl and jag" of existence still "a sluice of sweet delight / runs through them." If that sounds like Gerard Manley Hopkins, it's for good reason: he is a central presence in* The World Behind the World.

Bernard has always had a good eye and an even better ear. She's interested in music: why we make it and why we listen to it, how it moves us and what it means to be moved by art in the first place. For her, the aesthetic orients us, in complicated and deep ways, toward the real. As she writes in an earlier collection, "When actors speak and move / we all become more / real." As she writes in The World Behind the World, *"Making music, we / make God thereby, / or a simulacrum / so powerful I fear / to meet the real thing."*

Bernard and I spoke by email.

ANTHONY DOMESTICO: In "Sithens in a net," you record a wonderful literary exchange: "At a reading, John Ashbery was asked, / 'But what was that *about*?' and he said, 'I guess I'm just sad about time.'" If you were asked the same question about *The World Behind the World*—what is it *about*—how would you answer?

APRIL BERNARD: One reason I love Ashbery's response is that he was helplessly, and humorously, gesturing towards the impossibility of saying what his own poems were "about"—he was always accused, of course, of being too obscure. We usually *do* know what most poems are about, more or less: this sonnet is about how beauty dies and so does love; this poem is about the need for renewal after the destruction of a world war; another is about how trees are better than poems, and so on. As the writer of my book, I think I can say that I am, indeed, as advertised, writing about the spiritual world that I believe—or hope to believe—exists "behind" the material one, and that I am writing in order to reach it. That spiritual cosmos is a place of love, and kindness, and harmony, and terrifying beauty, and I am—in my best moments—convinced of its existence and trying to be worthy of it. I am also trying to show it to others.

Because we are all trapped within our own subjectivity, many of the occasions of spiritual insight accompany very personal ones. Moreover, I have a lot of large opinions about what's wrong with this world. One reader told me that *The World Behind the World* unfolds like a novel about my life; which also makes sense to me.

AD: The collection's first poem opens, "Six months after death, my mother / has come to haunt me. Ever / the opportunist, she finds the virus / lockdown a handy time to slide / into the slot for my shadow." One of the collection's final poems talks about a different kind of haunting: the cells that a baby leaves behind in his mother, "his dna t[aking] up residence // in organs various, brain / and heart and liver." What draws you to haunting, both at this point in your career and, as the first poem indicates, at this particular and strange moment in history?

AB: Hauntings happen whether you want them to or not; I don't write about them as a choice, exactly. In the two cases you cite, interestingly, I see that my hauntings have generational aspects. One haunting is unpleasant; the other, which links the scientific reality of DNA traces in my body to a spiritual experience, is about the deepest kind of love, the love for one's child.

Alas, it goes without saying that we live in a strange and mostly terrible time. If you are of a historical cast of mind, then you find yourself searching the past for the traces, the ghosts, that proleptically haunt the present.

AD: In a previous interview, you said that all serious art "reaches beyond the subjective and personal to something greater." That sense of something greater, and art's role in gesturing toward and maybe bringing us to it, has been present in your work from the start, and it's present in the new book, where you write that "All shared harmonies / tune it into being: / dance, pipes, a room / of students reading the long / poem by Ashbery aloud." (The "it" seems to be God.) How has your understanding of the relationship between art and "the world behind the world" changed over the years?

AB: It is still true that the art that matters most to me engages with what I'm calling spirituality, for lack of a better term. Dozens of painters, composers, and writers launch me (and I'm sure others) into the spiritual realm. People think of Larkin as pinched and despairing, but I have always heard the hopefulness and tenderness, which obviously embarrassed him, behind the tough words. Another writer who has meant a great deal to me is Chekhov; my admiration for him, and my frustration that I can only read him through the veil of translation, only deepens with time. I mention both these writers

April Bernard

because they are, to my mind, profoundly spiritual while also skeptical or atheistic when it comes to religious faith. Richard Gilman wrote of Chekhov's plays—specifically, *Three Sisters*—as creating "an opening into eternity." This reminds me, in turn, of Rilke's reference to "the Open." Critics like to write about Modernism as if it marked, absolutely, "the death of God," but it seems obvious to me that another, parallel stream of spirituality, not confined to Christianity but not bothering to repudiate it either, also emerged from Modernist concerns and flows ever forward. Doubtless, I am part of that flow.

I never meant to write about God at all; and yet when I wrote my second book, *Psalms*, I realized that I wanted to pray to, and quarrel with, something like God. The horrors of AIDS killing off a generation certainly pushed me that way.

"Something greater" does not have to mean only the spiritual realm, of course. Many concerns are greater than the self; those few poets who manage to write well about political matters are certainly writing beyond the self. Meanwhile, the lyric, which is as old as Sappho, is *the* form of personal utterance, in which the poet's interior life reaches out through the gorgeous inadequacy of language to the reader's interior life; and by so doing, it makes something much greater than those two people. It makes a third, shared thing: love, or communion, or political purpose, or merely (!) music itself.

AD: A poem from *Romanticism* (2009) begins, "The cloth edge of certainty / has shredded down to this: / God and love are real, / but very far away." These lines made me think of Gerard Manley Hopkins, an important poet for this collection and for anyone thinking about the closeness or distance of God. How has Hopkins helped you to think about the relationship between poetry and God? In "You can sing it," you write that Hopkins's "odd-ball meters" help "to mottle a vista that leads, / in variable measures, to the world / behind the world, where raggedy / becomes pattern and a staggered / amen in dappling laps whole." Are there other poets who offer you a similar vista?

ELIZABETH PEDINOTTI HAYNES

AB: No one is quite like Hopkins. There really is something in the music of his verse that takes us to truth, whether beautiful or terrible. So many poets can do the same thing for me—not in every poem, but Stevens and Moore and Rilke and Wyatt and Clare and Donne and Herbert and Shakespeare do it consistently. Poems by Frost and Bishop also achieve this sublimity; more recently, the poems of Frank Bidart, though stubbornly of the material world, bring a sorrowing historical sweep that approaches the spirit from a different angle. And, of course, Ashbery.

AD: Some of my favorite moments from the new book come in your descriptions of animals. In one poem, you write that a beloved dog "fills the world with peace, making / permanent what would otherwise fly away / on the lash of a clock's tick." Elsewhere you write that encountering a seal in the cold water off Nantucket brings about a respite from "all the pain our clever brains, self-winding like watches that won't stop, make in the world." I'm struck that both passages mention mechanized time: ticking clocks and watches. How do animals cause us to think about, or experience, time differently?

AB: There's also the line from "This Life": "We know only a little more / than the animals, and it is pain," by which pain I mean our complex self-consciousness. To be able to measure time puts us that much further away from the peace of the present moment; counting the minutes is the curse of humanity.

When an animal seems to be able to "read" you intuitively, and you the animal, the wordless communication is better than poems.

AD: That prose poem about meeting a "big-headed seal" in the Atlantic echoes Elizabeth Bishop's similar encounter with a seal in "At the Fishhouses." You studied with Bishop at Harvard and love her as a poet. What do you love about "At the Fishhouses" in particular?

AB: Oh, that fishhouses poem—and yes, of course, I was honoring Bishop. I know that I had Bishop's characterization of her seal gesturing with "a sort of a shrug" in mind when I described mine as "looking like he was about to laugh." Her poem ends, memorably, with a gesture of putting her hand into the cold sea, invoking a loss so great as to, paradoxically, create presence; one of many such moments in her work.

> If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
> then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Another way to describe the ending is that it "comes off the page," and leaps into the ether—like the end of Moore's "An Octopus," or the end of Dickinson's "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" Bishop's influence on me predated my meeting her and taking a class with her, and her work, studied closely still, all these years later, continues to educate me in the ways of intellectual and aesthetic resilience.

AD: Several of your new poems look back to the sixteenth century: "Lord, crack their teeth" gets its title from Mary Sidney's Psalm 58, "Wreathed with error" borrows from Thomas Wyatt's "My Galley Charged with Forgetfulness," and so on. What draws you to the Elizabethans? Is it their wit? Their use of the sonnet form and the particular movement of the mind and soul it suggests? Something else entirely?

AB: I'm excited by the way that the English language, as it was groping its way toward its "modern" form, exhibited so many idiosyncratic and evocative turns of phrase. Wyatt, the Sidneys, Shakespeare, Fulke Greville—all are vividly audible to me. "Such hap as I am happed in," for instance, contains "happy" and "happenstance" and "mishap" and makes them all alive at once. "Wreath'd with error" set me off on an intense meditation on what it feels like to live a life (mine) that feels encircled by the choking vines of mistakes and regrets. Any nonstandard English—whether from the sixteenth century or in any of the many regional styles and dialects of English spoken around the world—opens up new spaces for the imagination; I can get just as revved up by Brooklynese or Montana cowboy-speech as I am by the Elizabethans. These particular nonstandard Elizabethan speakers also happened to be incredible poets.

AD: In "Tree-crazy," you use the word "*enargeia*" and then offer the poet Alice Oswald's gloss: "Bright unbearable reality." The term was often used to praise Homer's ability to make things vividly present. It is, Oswald continues, "the word used when gods come to earth not in disguise but as themselves." Among living poets, whose *enargeia* do you most admire?

AB: While there are many living poets whose work I love, I don't actually see an engagement with *energeia* animating much poetry these days. Gorgeousness is very much out of fashion, and even the most musical of my contemporaries seem slightly embarrassed by their flutings.

The book that I keep giving to students and friends is David Ferry's translation of Virgil's *Eclogues*, which Farrar, Straus and Giroux has, thrillingly, kept in print. Its music, gorgeousness, and *energeia* are firstly due to Virgil, of course, but Ferry's contributory genius has made it available to us in English and it is really something.

The other poet I'm reading—again and at last, with a new understanding and awe—is Adam Zagajewski, in Renata Gorczyńska's translation.

Two Poems By April Bernard

"MY THOUGHTS ARE EAGLES' FOOD"

From a poem by Fulke Greville

I seek aid: My grandmother's gilt
clock that plays Greensleeves
now fills me with dread; can you
muffle its sharp-toothed chime?
Dab my forehead with rose water,
sing me a song I never heard before,
tell me something to me make me laugh
and rest content—a state unknown.
My thoughts run races, mousey
and fearful, scattering to the edges
of the autumn lawn. Leave them
to the raptors, now. Shame
turns out to be a choice, a wire taut
on the trap we set ourselves, of use until it's not.

THIS LIFE

I would be the dove, tucked
in the heavy arbor, listening to the rain
tap the leaf lobes. I would be the bear,
stupid beneath the snow.

Say a syringe came to tease me with relief,
offering my stretch of earth: for this,
I would pay even the jewels of poetry.
But bribes don't work.

Did I agree to this? The sages tell us
that blindness in the morning
may give way to sight by evening....

How they lie. We know only a little more
than the animals, and it is pain. This life
that demands, with every sun-up, to be lived.

ALEJANDRO ANREUS

Diversity Done Right

'Juan de Pareja' and 'Something Beautiful'

It's no secret that museums and art galleries are under mounting pressure from activists, critics, artists, and the public to become more diverse. The results have mostly been uneven. But if two extraordinary shows that opened this spring and summer in New York City are any indication, change is coming. Mounted at two very different institutions, both devote necessary attention to artists and topics that have been willfully marginalized or simply ignored.

The Met's *Juan de Pareja, Afro-Hispanic Painter* is a show in which context and rediscovery are everything. We already have some familiarity with the subject thanks to Diego Velázquez's famous portrait, which was purchased by the Met in 1971 for the then record-setting amount of $5.5 million. (The work is a solid example of Velázquez's mature style; the price seems modest compared to today's delirious figures.)

Who was this handsome, dark-skinned man wearing a mustache and goatee? Pareja was an enslaved member of Velázquez's household, his existence first documented in the mid-1630s. Born in Antequera in southern Spain, possibly to enslaved parents, Pareja was of sub-Saharan African heritage, and a *morisco* (Muslims forced by the Spanish monarchy to convert to Christianity after 1492).

It is very possible that Velázquez himself trained Pareja as a painter. We know that Velázquez brought him on a 1649 trip to Rome, where he traveled to acquire art for King Philip IV. This is when Pareja posed for the portrait, which was actually a "practice picture" for another portrait of Pope Innocent X. Shortly thereafter, Velázquez signed a document of manumission that would free Pareja at the end of a period of four years, on the condition that Pareja not attempt to escape or commit any criminal act.

The Met show includes most of Pareja's surviving works, all painted during the last twenty years of his life. Was he an artist of originality, of substance? The problem with this question is that *any* artist next to Velázquez will seem competent at best. Of the many canvases in the show, two by Pareja stand out: *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1661) and *Portrait of the Architect José Ratés* (c. 1664). The first is Pareja's most ambitious multi-figure composition. Here he fuses elements of Titian (the sumptuous tablecloth and Christ's bright garments) and El Greco (the elongated figures seated at the table). Pareja also includes a self-portrait on the far left of the scene, placing himself among the sinners that accompany Matthew. Pareja's portrait of Ratés likewise exhibits solid drawing, and a skilled handling of pigment. The earthy realism of Pareja's corpulent subject recalls the influence of Caravaggio on seventeenth-century Spanish painting (including on the young Velázquez). In this sober work, Pareja distinguishes himself as a stylist with a vision all his own. His other paintings in the show, such as *The Flight into Egypt* (1658) and *The Baptism of Christ* (1667), are less convincing. Sentimental and drab, they betray Pareja's occasionally insecure grasp of drawing and his awkward handling of paint.

The rest of the show features paintings by Spanish Baroque masters Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Francisco de Zurbarán, and Claudio Coello, among others. There are also a handful of polychrome wood sculptures (including a magnificent rendering of the Black Sicilian Franciscan St. Benedict of Palermo, attributed to Montes de Oca), as well as eight canvases by Velázquez. Taken together, the works give visitors a sense of Pareja's visual world, one in which Black people figured prominently in complex ways.

Our recognition of this fact owes much to the Harlem Renaissance scholar Arturo Alfonso Schomburg. An erudite Afro–Puerto Rican intellectual and collector (for whom a New York Public Library research center in Harlem is named), Schomburg pioneered research into Pareja more than a century ago. During the 1910s he patiently reconstructed the multiracial Spanish society of Pareja's time, highlighting how people of African descent (*moros* and *moriscos*) had played important yet

Velázquez, *Juan de Pareja* (ca. 1608-1670), 1650.

PURCHASE, FLETCHER AND ROGERS FUNDS, AND BEQUEST OF MISS ADELAIDE MILTON DE GROOT (1876-1967), BY EXCHANGE, SUPPLEMENTED BY GIFTS FROM FRIENDS OF THE MUSEUM, 1971

unrecognized parts. Schomburg's utilization of the term "Afro-Hispanic"—more common today—was innovative, as was his promotion of Pareja's identifiable paintings. (Art historian James A. Porter included Pareja in the earliest edition of his *Modern Negro Art* book.)

The Met show presents this material with clarity and elegance, never hitting the visitor with the "book on the wall" approach of many exhibitions. It constitutes a serious gesture toward thoughtful cultural equity. Still, it makes one wish the Met had had the courage to exhibit their holdings of modern Latin-American and contemporary Latinx art, instead of simply stressing diversity in the European past.

Located one mile up Fifth Avenue from the Met, El Museo del Barrio is doing just that. After a well-received series of recent exhibitions mostly consisting of loans from private collectors and other institutions (*DOMESTICANX*, an intergenerational multidisciplinary show, focused on the spirituality of the private sphere; *Juan Francisco Elso: Por América* examined the career of the

late Cuban sculptor), El Museo del Barrio is now highlighting their permanent collection in a series of rotations from among their more than 8,500 holdings. *Something Beautiful: Reframing La Colección* groups an enormous number of these objects into a variety of innovative concepts and categories. There's Taíno culture as a living resource; aspects of life in East Harlem and other barrios; printmaking and graphics as essential to both Puerto Rican and Nuyorican expression; abstraction, queer identities, and the body; and an individual retrospective of the late maestra Myrna Báez. The packed exhibition flows gracefully through the relatively modest space.

There are some extraordinary visual moments. Among the most interesting are Carlos Mérida's portfolio of color lithographs depicting scenes from the Popol Vuh, a sacred Mayan text written in K'iche', and several cases of Taíno artifacts. These sit alongside contemporary works like Juan Sánchez's gorgeous painting *The Most Cultural Thing You Can Do* (1983), which fuses luscious colors and rich textures, pictographs, and a photo-collage of a tattooed Puerto Rican flag along with a text from the Young Lords about self-reliance and protection. Sánchez's ability to create politically and spiritually charged works in a formally beautiful language has few parallels in contemporary art.

The exhibition is also strong in photography and printmaking. There are compelling images by Hiram Maristany, Perla de León, Máximo Colón, Héctor Méndez Caratini, Luis Carle, Julio Nazario, and Geandy Pavón, to name a few. The late ADÁL (Maldonado), a genuine Nuyorican Dadaist, blows us away with his blurry *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* series. Technical virtuosity and conceptual clarity is also evident in the linocuts and woodcuts of the Puerto Rican maestros Lorenzo Homar and Rafael Tufiño, who influenced Nuyorican printmakers whose works are also present. Worth a second look are José Alicea's portfolio centered on a poem by Julia de Burgos, Antonio Martorell's woodcuts with Ernesto Cardenal's "Salmos," and the funky and empowering graphics of the Taller Boricua artists. Folk art is also well represented, with paintings, textiles, and objects mounted alongside the work of trained artists. Particularly exquisite among these are four Mola cotton textiles by Guma artists from the 1970s.

Carlos Mérida, *Estampas de Popol Vuh—Sin título*, 1943

El Museo boasts an eclectic collection of paintings, from the geometric abstractions of Carmen Herrera, Fanny Sanín, and César Paternosto, to the expressive figuration of Nitza Tufiño, Jorge Soto, and Beatriz González. The section dedicated to the late painter and printmaker Myrna Báez (1931–2018) is simply breathtaking, making this viewer wish for a major retrospective of her work, long overdue. Five prints and two paintings by Báez present her poetic realism, where the human body appears both sharp and fluid and the landscape pulsates with movement.

Rounding things out are two works commissioned specifically for this reframing of El Museo's collection. Glendalys Medina's sculptural, site-specific intervention, *Cohoba*, brings viewers into the ceremony that lies at the spiritual center of Taíno life. Like a small, darkened chapel built to hold saintly relics, Medina's creation grants comfort and serenity to the visitor. By way of contrast, Maria Gaspar's *Force of Things* is a minimalist tour de force of sculpture, painting, and video. It commemorates the demolition of the largest single-site prison in the country, Chicago's Cook County Department of Corrections. In a cold, white space, visitors

GIFT OF ELINORE TUNICK/EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

Myrna Báez, *Noviembre 1976*, 1976

are confronted with actual jail debris salvaged from the site—penal objects rarely visible beyond carceral spaces. Gaspar's open-ended arrangements enable viewers to experience, if only for a moment, the same emptiness, brokenness, and despair that prisons and jails regularly inflict on their inhabitants.

Aesthetics have always been inseparable from politics, and the curators of *Something Beautiful* make this refreshingly palpable. They write: "Unlike the majority of mainstream art museum collections, which continue to center Eurocentric values and art historical canons despite efforts to diversify, our collection is grounded in a decolonial project." That's been true since El Museo's founding in 1969, when it emerged *from* and *for* the Nuyorican community. Since then, it has expanded to embrace the city's many other Latino communities (Chicano, Dominican, Cuban, Central and South American), as well as Latin America, without forsaking its Nuyorican origins. The reinstallation of the collection is therefore much more than a simple updating of a single institution. With its focus on hybridity—that paradoxical, life-giving fusion of Indigenous, African, and Spanish cultures—it's a profound statement of the complexity of Latinx identity as a whole. It will surely resonate with Latinx communities across the United States and beyond.

Juan de Pareja, Afro-Hispanic Painter, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, through July 16

Something Beautiful: Reframing La Colección, El Museo del Barrio, through March 2024

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EL MUSEU DEL BARRIO

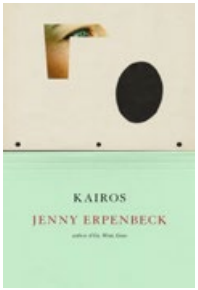
Socialist Weather

BAILEY TRELA

The plot of Jenny Erpenbeck's latest novel, *Kairos*, begins with an aria to chance. On a Friday in July 1986, on a bus trundling through East Berlin, the eyes of a young woman and an older writer meet. There is the usual guesswork, the play of expectations. *Is he really looking at me? What could she possibly want?* They get off at the same stop, happen to be heading in the same direction—when their destination turns out to be closed, they end up having coffee. It's a model meet-cute, serendipity squared.

Later, when the young woman, Katharina, contemplates the sheer contingency of their first encounter, she experiences a sense of vertigo. "The thought that everything might have come about differently if she'd left home ten minutes later," Erpenbeck writes, is "enough to make her head reel." The man, Hans, is similarly stricken. "I feel ill, he says, when I think of the odds of us sailing past each other, and never meeting."

Time, in several senses, defines the relationship that emerges from this chance meeting. There is the age gap, of course: when the affair begins, Katharina is nineteen, an apprentice printer and typesetter; Hans is fifty-eight, a respected novelist and radio presenter. Generationally, the gap is even wider. "She had only just been born when his first book appeared," Erpenbeck notes. "He took his first steps under Hitler." There is a sense as well that a pendent historical moment has fostered the affair. In other words, what makes the relationship between Hans and Katharina tick is that it seems to have come about at *precisely* the right time.



KAIROS

JENNY ERPENBECK
TRANS. BY MICHAEL HOFMANN

New Directions

$25.95 | 336 pp.

People stand on the Berlin Wall, Germany, November 1989

INTERFOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

This is, as the novel's title suggests, thematically on point. For the ancient Greeks, as Erpenbeck points out early in the novel, Kairos was "the god of fortunate moments," a fleet-footed purveyor of opportunity who had to be seized the moment he presented himself. As the god of chance, Kairos provides a stable ruling conceit for the novel, even as his presence diminishes over its course.

Technically, the novel opens in the present day. Hans has just died, and in America two large cardboard boxes arrive on Katharina's doorstep, filled with "letters and carbons of letters, scribbled notes, shopping lists," and so on—the material remains of their relationship. *Kairos* is divided into five parts, with two large chunks, set in the late 1980s and early '90s, that correspond to each of the boxes deposited on Katharina's porch, as well as a brief prologue, intermezzo, and epilogue that occur in the present day. What we're meant to take away from these boxes is unclear—if anything, they seem an arch *memento mori*, a reminder that history, in the end, only ever boils down to this: a box of small nothings, a personal museum.

Erpenbeck, one of Germany's leading writers, has a strange half-presence in America. Her last full-length novel to appear in English, 2017's *Go, Went, Gone*, was praised by the likes of James Wood for its sensitive treatment of the 2015 European migrant crisis, and brought a new level of attention to her work, even as its intensely contemporary setting and journalistic ethos set it apart from her other fiction. The publication of *Not a Novel: A Memoir in Pieces* in 2020 brought a renewed focus to Erpenbeck's writerly roots. Born in East Berlin in 1967, she was twenty-two when the Berlin Wall came down, which helps explain her work's persistent probing of borders, freedom, silence, and control.

As *Not a Novel* makes clear, the much-vaunted freedom that roared into the former German Democratic Republic after the fall of the Berlin Wall came at a curious price. "[E]verything that had been called the present until then was now called the past," Erpenbeck writes. "Our everyday lives weren't everyday lives anymore, they were just an adventure that we had survived." While this sense of a life divided suffuses all her writing, the experience of growing up in the GDR and navigating a reunified Germany as a young adult has rarely taken center stage in Erpenbeck's fiction. *Kairos*, set largely in the late 1980s and early '90s in East Berlin, is her clearest engagement with that history to date.

The book's atmosphere is a haunted one; remnants of past regimes and hints of the neighboring state spring up constantly. When Hans and Katharina cross the Weidendammer Brücke, they move "past the iron eagle left behind by the state before last." As Katharina walks over "the metal grid of an U-Bahn airshaft," she can hear "the clatter of a West Berlin train underfoot" and feel "a puff of Western air" rising and merging with the "Socialist weather" surrounding her. The delicate irony of "Socialist weather"—as if the air itself were different on either side of the Berlin Wall—captures a complex, self-aware state of mind, one that intermingles weary protest, self-mockery, and even longing.

At the center of the novel, of course, is the love affair between Katharina and Hans, which begins in rapt involution. "It's bliss, says Hans, a state he's rarely experienced before with another person: withdrawal from everything roundabout into one's own essence," Erpenbeck writes. "A kind of inner emigration." Hans, and to a lesser extent Katharina, retreat into an ordered space of their own making. We sense a personal crisis brewing for Hans: "Everything about his life at this time is provisional." What's more, he seems to sense that whatever happens in their love or in the world, Katharina will be fine—that there is a flexibility, or at least a necessary thoughtlessness, in her youth. Not that this is a subject he broaches; part of their contract—unspoken, it seems—is that the grit and particulates of their relationship are never touched. "Because everything is avoided that might make one or other of them sad, sadness suddenly comes to occupy a lot of space between them," Erpenbeck writes. "He is old enough to know how the end likes to set its roots first imperceptibly, then ever more boldly, in the present."

Fittingly for a novel about an all-consuming love affair, *Kairos* is written in a complex, interleaved style, and like many of Erpenbeck's novels, it makes use of a slyly omniscient narrator. The playfulness of Erpenbeck's prose (translated here by Michael Hofmann) is almost musical. Music is everywhere in *Kairos*, from the protest songs of Wolf Biermann, to classical compositions like Chopin's A-minor mazurka, while stylistically the novel takes a contrapuntal approach to language, dialogue, and theme. Hans and Katharina's first sexual encounter, for instance, is set to Mozart's Requiem in D minor:

> The dead go trembling up to Heaven, while the two human bodies turn themselves into landscape that may not be seen, only grasped, contours tracked with innumerable paths, where one may not run away, you know, he says, the next section is the *Dies irae*, the day of divine fury, no, she says, shaking her head as though she knew better, you're wrong, and she pulls him even closer to her.

There is give in the syntax, a looseness that interweaves art and sensation. Erpenbeck's novels tend to avoid direct dialogue, couching it instead as recollection or otherwise filtering it through a character's consciousness. The result is a slurring, sliding effect. It's a prose uniquely suited to capturing the later stages of Hans and Katharina's affair, which takes a dark turn toward sadomasochism.

When Katharina leaves her job as a typesetter and begins working at a theater company, she catches the eye of a coworker, Vadim. They sleep together, just once, but that's enough to create an almost insurmountable rift in her relationship with Hans. Both are heartbroken, and tumble into a psychologically dense cycle of forgiveness and punishment. Katharina's penitence is immedi-

The reader begins to sense that the love of Hans and Katharina has been falling apart from the moment they met—and that this is nothing to be sad about.

ate and somewhat theatrical. She races to a salon where her hair is cut short, so that "she looks like a sinner, like what she is." Hans, divided, wants both to prolong and to curtail his perceived humiliation, and searches about for a method of renovating the wasteland their love has become.

Eventually, he begins to record a series of cassettes for Katharina, which she listens to alone in her apartment, responding point by point. "In the radio voice in which Hans ordinarily speaks about Schubert, or Janacek or Mahler," Erpenbeck writes, "he talks for an hour about her and her transgression." The tapes seem to alternate between great spiels, arias of abuse—an aural assault—and whispery, Beckettian insinuations. The aim is nothing less than the de-creation of a self, the conversion of Katharina's mind into a blank slate. Hans is transformed into a looming, autocratic figure. "The tapes," for Katharina, "are the umbilical cord by which terror fattens itself on words," Erpenbeck writes. "The terror grows and grows, not least because it never ends."

When Katharina's mother objects that Hans should have forgiven her by now, Katharina balks at the idea. "Doesn't her mother understand that the greatest gift Hans can give isn't forgiveness but the thorough inspection of the wreckage? That's the only way anything new and lasting can begin." Meanwhile, life goes on. Hans and Katharina take a trip to Moscow and spend a week admiring the monuments or holing up in their hotel room; they meet for a drink in the Café Arkade; they have whole days when something like happiness steals over them.

For the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, the concept of *kairos* denoted "the moment in which the eternal breaks into the temporal, and the temporal is prepared to receive it." *Chronos*, or quantitative time, dissolves, and our sense of time becomes primarily qualitative. In its original formulation, Tillich's understanding of *kairos* as the propitious moment had a political valence; Tillich began using the term after the First World War, when a flurry of cultural and social crises led him to join the Religious Socialist movement.

Erpenbeck's novel is obsessed with the dissolution of time as we ordinarily experience it, especially, in its final act, with the granular details of life lived amidst "the fusion of two utterly different states in record time." There is a sense that the propitious moment has not been seized or, at the very least, has not been seized *properly*. Whatever the hopes for unification, it was, in the end, an unequal union, a failed *kairos*. To better grasp this failure, a synoptic perspective begins to take over. "Wasn't it agreed that a unified Germany would get a new constitution? Instead, the Basic Law of West Germany has extended its jurisdiction over the eastern part of Germany," Erpenbeck writes. "Was that fair? Gummi bears, handbags and scarves. An entire guerrilla army of hitherto law-abiding Eastern maidens swarms out to hit the West where it feels it the most, which is in the matter of ownership and payment."

When these lines appear, the narrative is focused on Katharina, and there are elements that might have emerged from her consciousness. But something else seems to be going on. The third-person narration seems to be filtered through and inflected by a communal rather than an individual consciousness. It's as though the society itself is speaking. At the very least, we seem to be overhearing, even participating in, a ructious conversation taking place in a currency exchange line or some other public space.

In the novel's final act, Hans and Katharina almost seem to retreat into the wings, as this communal perspective begins to predominate. This isn't a criticism—the relationship between the individual and society is simply another dialectic that Erpenbeck prefers to leave unresolved. For Tillich, *kairos* necessarily involved a working through of the "concrete tensions" between the present and the future—which, as Erpenbeck's novel makes clear, is precisely what failed to occur in the early 1990s. The obvious and unavoidable tensions between East Germany and West Germany weren't resolved so much as swept away.

As a novelist, Erpenbeck is wary of swift and unequivocal resolutions, choosing instead to reside in extended moments of tension. In effect, almost everything about Erpenbeck's latest novel, from the musical texture of its prose to its occasionally synoptic narration, is arranged to allow these tensions to remain wonderfully unresolved—even those that seem to be at the heart of the relationship between Hans and Katharina. Erpenbeck is careful not to make their relationship into an allegory for German reunification, and indeed, reading *Kairos*, one begins to sense that the love of Hans and Katharina has been falling apart from the moment they met—and that this is nothing to be sad about. Erpenbeck almost wants us to feel it as a relief that the lovers are allowed to go their separate ways. There is serendipity in the relationship's beginning, and necessity in its ending.

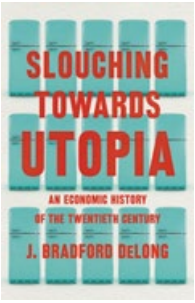
BAILEY TRELA *is a writer and critic whose work has appeared in the* Baffler, Frieze, *the* Cleveland Review of Books, *and elsewhere.*

Good While It Lasted

ANTHONY ANNETT

Thomas Robert Malthus was possibly the most pessimistic economist of all time. Writing in the early nineteenth century, he argued that technological advances were ultimately futile as they would not raise living standards. In his telling, any rise in living standards would just lead to an increase in population, which would push per capita income back down to subsistence levels. This is the famous Malthusian trap. Malthus might have been right about most of human history, but things were starting to change just as he was writing. The Industrial Revolution created a way to escape from this trap: output rose faster than population, leading to an increase in per capita output. Living standards rose.

In an impressive new book titled *Slouching Towards Utopia: An Economic History of the Twentieth Century*, economist Brad DeLong tells the story of the escape from the Malthusian trap over what he calls the long twentieth century—from 1870 to 2010. DeLong argues persuasively that this escape did not happen during the first Industrial Revolution—the revolution of steam power and railways. Rather, it happened after 1870, owing to three developments: the advent of the industrial research lab, which allowed for invention on the back of invention; the emergence of the modern corporation, which allowed the market to harness new technologies; and the expansion of globalization, which led to a massive decrease in the cost of transportation and communications. It was these developments that created what DeLong calls an "economic El Dorado" between 1870 and 1914. DeLong notes that Marx, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, was on to something when he stressed the immiseration of the working class. But after 1870, Marx's analysis was simply wrong. There were still serious economic problems during this period, including the extremely high inequality that gave rise to the Gilded Age. But by and large, ordinary people in Europe and North America were finally benefiting from technological progress.



SLOUCHING TOWARDS UTOPIA

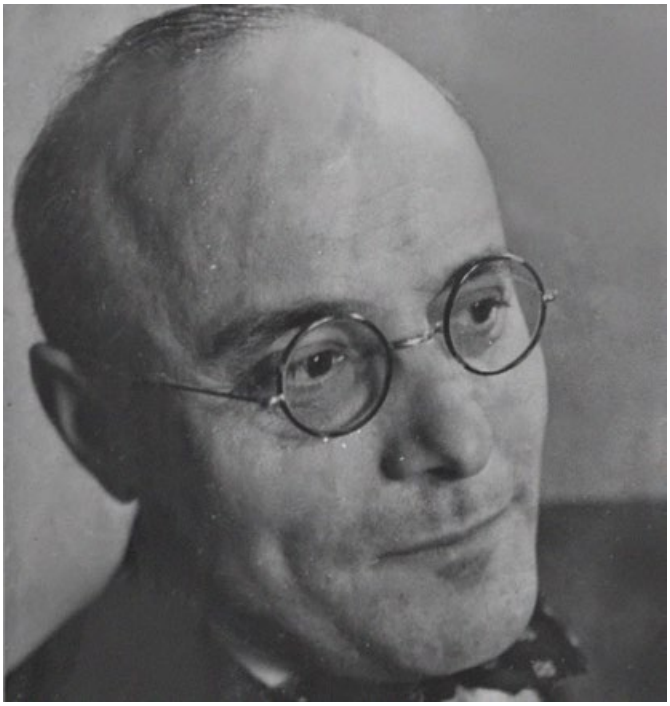
An Economic History of the Twentieth Century

J. BRADFORD DELONG

Basic Books

$35 | 624 pp.

Karl Polyani



ALBUM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

This El Dorado didn't last. It was unwound by the First World War, then by the rise of fascism and communism, and finally by the Great Depression and the Second World War. The big question DeLong asks is why things went so badly wrong. Why—given our new ability to increase economic output so much—didn't we figure out a way to distribute that output so that people could have their needs met? DeLong is following a line of inquiry introduced by John Maynard Keynes in a 1930 essay titled "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren." Keynes argued that technology would solve the economic problem so that everyone would have enough—and that, before the end of the twentieth century, no one would need to work more than fifteen hours a week. Keynes was right about the ability of technological change to dramatically increase incomes. But he was wrong that the economic problem would be solved. Debates about the distribution of resources are more contentious than ever. Inequality is skyrocketing, poverty is still with us, and people are still working forty-hour weeks.

What happened? DeLong's answer is that technology revolutionizes the economy in every generation, and that this is bound to have social and political consequences. Governments find it hard to provide for people's needs in the face of such constant fomentation. In his most original contribution, DeLong

Friedrich Hayek

frames this as a struggle between the ideas of Friedrich Hayek and those of Karl Polanyi. DeLong summarizes Hayek's position as "the market giveth, the market taketh away: blessed be the name of the market." Hayek argued that the decentralized nature of the market would, if unimpeded, lead to remarkable wealth creation. The state only needed to protect property rights, and the rest would take care of itself. The problem, DeLong argues, is that people demand rights other than property rights. This is where Polanyi comes in. DeLong's summary of Polanyi's position is "the market was made for man, not man for the market." In other words, people's needs must come first, and these needs are not necessarily met by the market. Polanyi argued that relying on property rights at the expense of other economic rights was bad news. What are these other economic rights, according to Polanyi? As DeLong puts it, they are "rights to a community that gave them support, to an income that gave them the resources they deserved, and to economic stability that gave them consistent work."

If these rights were not guaranteed, Polanyi argued, then there would be a backlash. This backlash took many forms over the long twentieth century—some negative, such as fascism, Nazism, and communism; some positive, such as the postwar experience of social democracy. DeLong's narrative brings home the role of contingency in all of this. It was not inevitable for World War I to break out when it did. But once it did break out, it led to an increasing economic divergence between the United States and Europe—while Europe suffered from economic, social, and political upheaval, the United States enjoyed the Roaring Twenties. It was just luck that Republicans happened to be in power when the Great Depression began; if they hadn't been, Franklin Roosevelt might never have been elected with a mandate to implement New Deal policies and lay the groundwork for a new economic order. And without the experience of war and the solidarity it generated, social democracy might not have won out in the postwar period.

DeLong is at heart a social democrat. In his telling, the postwar social-democratic era in both Europe and the United States was the closest thing to economic utopia we have ever experienced—with economic growth rates surpassing even those of the 1870–1914 period, all in the context of low inequality and strong financial stability. Even before the war, the countries that did best during the Great Depression were the social-democratic (and mainly Scandinavian) countries.

For DeLong, social democracy is best seen as a "shotgun marriage" between Hayek and Polanyi, blessed by John Maynard Keynes with his commitment to full employment. I would argue that social democracy is an even bigger accomplishment than this formulation might suggest. As Thomas Piketty argues in his most recent book, *A Brief History of Equality*, social democracy marked a decisive shift in economic history. Something new was afoot—a huge expansion in the social-assistance state and progressive taxation over the latter half of the twentieth century.

DeLong recognizes an element of tragedy in the story of social democracy. As a system, it had proved its mettle. But by the 1970s, people started to lose faith in it. They began to take prosperity for granted, expecting ever-high growth rates. When growth faltered, redistribution became more controversial: without growth, some people had to get less in order for others to have more. On top of this, the experience of inflation during the late 1960s and '70s undermined public confidence in the ability of social-democratic policymakers to deliver stability. In DeLong's telling, this was what spurred the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, which defined the final period of his narrative.

But neoliberalism turned out to be a failure. It did not deliver the return to rapid growth that it promised, but it did lead to much higher inequality—and, in countries like the United States, to a second Gilded Age. This went hand in hand with a technology-induced decline in manufacturing employment. Globalization and market reforms did benefit the developing world, especially in Asia, but this was little comfort to people suffering from neoliberal policies in the deindustrialized West. So why, despite its failure, did neoliberalism prove so enduring? DeLong's answer is that capitalism was perceived to have won the Cold War, and

ROGER TILLBERG/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

there was a triumphalist, end-of-history ethos around neoliberalism.

DeLong's narrative ends in 2010, right after a global financial crisis destroyed the credibility of neoliberalism and led to populist and nativist backlashes. Here, he faults Barack Obama for switching immediately to austerity when unemployment remained high and recovery had barely begun. Given the political climate at the time, it's hard to know if Obama could have pursued a different policy. But the story ends too abruptly to really draw this out, and one wonders why DeLong did not choose a later endpoint for his narrative.

Slouching Towards Utopia presents a compelling narrative and a fine overview of more than a century of economic history. It's well written and doesn't require any special training in economics on the part of the reader. Still, the book has its flaws. Especially in its early chapters, DeLong tends to get sidetracked with barely relevant vignettes and extraneous details. He devotes too little attention to the developing world and to the rise of China. Climate change gets only a passing mention, despite its looming importance for economies throughout the world and the particular challenge it poses to neoliberalism. But for a book that covers as much ground as this one does, these are minor quibbles.

Finally, what about that title? Are we still slouching toward utopia, or sliding away from it? There are few signs that our economic situation is about to improve any time soon. Technological advances continue, but we still haven't learned how to divide the fruits of those advances equitably—how to make sure that everyone has enough and how to value everyone's contribution. We need to think hard about what the next Polanyian backlash might look like, and what a twenty-first-century revival of social democracy would require.

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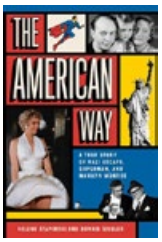
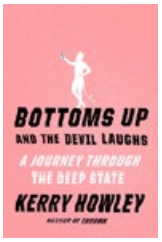
BOOKS IN BRIEF



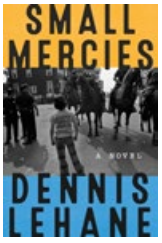
THE AMERICAN WAY
A True Story of Nazi Escape, Superman, and Marilyn Monroe
HELENE STAPINSKI & BONNIE SIEGLER
Simon & Schuster
$28.99 | 384 pp.

A tale that opens with the improbable and comes tantalizingly close to the hard-to-believe—though, as the subtitle says, it's all true. Found footage from the shoot of Marilyn Monroe's infamous *The Seven Year Itch* scene spurs a search into the life of Jules Schulback, Siegler's grandfather and the man who captured the moment with his 16-mm camera. Following two different escapes from Nazi Germany, Schulback settled in New York, and his story unfolds through intersecting accounts of the larger-than-life midcentury Americans he encountered along the way. "Special appearances," as the cover copy notes, include Arthur Miller, Bess Myerson, Walter Winchell, Albert Einstein, and Marlene Dietrich, as well as mobsters, athletes, movie directors, and comic-book publishers. *The American Way* entertainingly summons a part of this country's past that now seems mythical, but to those who experienced it firsthand was thrillingly real.



BOTTOMS UP AND THE DEVIL LAUGHS
A Journey Through the Deep State
KERRY HOWLEY
Knopf
$28 | 256 pp.

In her new book, *New York* magazine writer Kerry Howley considers privacy not just the ability to keep secret what we want, but "the freedom to live as if most of what passes for experience will not endure." Howley investigates the disappearance of this freedom primarily through the stories of those enmeshed in the vast government surveillance and secrecy apparatus that coalesced in the United States after 9/11. Her primary subject is Reality Winner, who was sentenced to five years in prison after leaking classified information on Russian interference in the 2016 election. Howley mixes straight reporting with wry, philosophical reflections on the new regime and the conspiracy theories and distrust it has engendered. It's arguable whether the style is best suited to the subject matter, but the writing is lucid and compelling and the questions it raises are urgent.



SMALL MERCIES
A Novel
DENNIS LEHANE
HarperCollins
$24 | 320 pp.

Dennis Lehane, the bestselling novelist of *Mystic River* and *Gone, Baby, Gone*, is a master of spinning suspenseful tales of the criminal underworld. *Small Mercies*, his latest (and reported final) thriller, is set against the backdrop of Boston's desegregation of its public schools. Mary Pat Fennesy, a lifelong resident of Southie, is looking for her daughter, Jules, who doesn't come home one night—the same night a young Black man is found dead. Mary Pat suspects the two events are connected, and her search for Jules pits her against a local Irish crew who is about as eager to help her out as they are to welcome Black students. Unfortunately, Lehane sacrifices the best parts of his story to gratuitous (and implausible) scenes of violence and the ugly racism of his characters, Mary Pat included. Rather than offering any kind of reckoning with the neighborhood's troubled history of bigotry and brutality, the final pages fall short, ultimately no more meaningful than the novel's eponymous mercies.

Uses and Abuses

ELIZABETH M. LYNCH

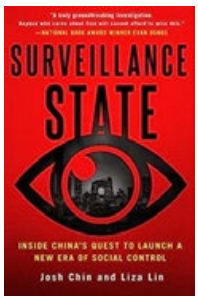
Dozens of surveillance cameras installed on a beam over a road in Hangzhou, China

IMAGINECHINA VIA AP IMAGES

Every so often, I witness a scene in my neighborhood that's all too common in New York City. A single car is double-parked on a narrow side street in front of a large apartment building. A blocked, frustrated driver—say, of a school bus full of frenetic children, or a delivery van on a tight schedule—angrily lays on the horn, sometimes for a full minute or more. Sometimes the guilty party sheepishly emerges to move their vehicle. But just as often they don't.

If this were not Queens but Hangzhou, a city near China's eastern coast, there would be no need for honking. In China's "smart cities," surveillance cameras immediately flag double-parked cars and run their plates to identify the owner. Local city managers, known as the *Chengguan*, then order such cars be moved via text message. Traffic can then resume flowing within minutes.

This is one positive element of China's increasingly data-driven governance, analyzed by veteran reporters Josh Chin and Liza Lin in *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control*. Their presentation can make Hangzhou seem like a paradise of efficiency, even to Americans skeptical of government control. Given China's extensive record of human-rights violations, it can be tempting to dismiss innovations like Hangzhou's camera and AI-based technology as tools of oppression. But, as Chin and Lin point out, the story is more complicated: surveillance technology in places like Hangzhou actually *has* improved the lives of some Chinese citizens. But it's telling that "Datatopia," Chin and Lin's chapter on the benefits of surveillance in Hangzhou, is also the book's shortest.



SURVEILLANCE STATE

Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control

JOSH CHIN & LIZA LIN

St. Martin's Press

$20 | 320 pp.

The rest of *Surveillance State* is devoted to cataloging and analyzing the ways in which Chinese authorities use facial recognition, social media and consumer data, biometrics, and a vast network of cameras to subdue and, in the case of China's Uyghur population, persecute its people. The book opens by recounting the story of Uyghur poet and filmmaker Tahir Hamut. Hamut describes how his family was brought to a police station to have their faces analyzed, their blood drawn, and their irises scanned. As Hamut watches other men in his town gradually being rounded up and sent elsewhere, he begins to realize that the police were surveilling his family to make it easier to locate and arrest *him*. Hamut takes to laying out a set of clothes every night before bed, in case the police suddenly arrive to take him away. He also starts exploring ways to help his family escape China.

Such horrors, especially those committed against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, have been well documented by journalists and academics. What Chin and Lin offer is a new perspective on the historical context of such surveillance. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is hardly the only state government to use technology for national-security purposes. Chin and Lin point out that in 2012, Barack Obama announced plans to harness big data. (The "Big Data Research and Development Initiative" invested $200 million across six federal agencies.) Where the CCP differs

is in its profound belief in the capacity of technology to literally re-engineer society and re-program its people. This belief isn't new. In its early days, the CCP used lower-tech methods such as extensive propaganda, forced indoctrination, and political campaigns like the Cultural Revolution; reeducation through labor wasn't outlawed until 2013. (Xinjiang's internment camps remain a glaring exception.)

As early as the mid-1950s, the CCP was already attempting to develop systems that could process large amounts of data in order to predict human behavior and solve societal problems. One of *Surveillance State*'s most fascinating chapters is "Man and Machine," about the life and work of mathematician and physicist Qian Xuesen. Qian had been living in the United States for more than ten years, working at Caltech and on the Manhattan Project, when the CCP took over mainland China. After falling afoul of McCarthyism in 1950, Qian was kept under house arrest in his California home for five years. In 1955, the United States deported Qian and his family to China. Back in China, Qian helped create China's nuclear-weapons program; he also delved deeper into cybernetics, the study of the relationship between information and control. Qian believed cybernetics could help reduce political corruption and resolve economic challenges. By 1989, Qian was arguing that "scientific development" needed to be more closely tied to social stability. Thirty years later, that is precisely what the CCP believes it is doing.

While *Surveillance State* does an excellent job unpacking the CCP's philosophical commitment to surveillance, it also makes a few missteps. For one thing, it would have benefited from a more linear historical narrative—jumping back in time at the beginning of every chapter is confusing. More glaringly, "Partners in Pre-Crime," a chapter that explores U.S. tech companies' assistance in developing China's surveillance state, is unpersuasive. Here the authors casually assert that "The Western business world…has midwifed the Party's surveillance state since its embryonic beginnings in the late 1990s." But Chin and Lin don't provide compelling evidence of this. Most of their examples involve partnerships from the early 2000s, a time when both the United States and the United Kingdom engaged in even more surveillance than China. It's true that companies like HP, Seagate, and Western Digital still sell hardware to Chinese companies, but that doesn't make them co-creators of China's surveillance state. Consider what happened in Hangzhou. The idea of a smart city, along with some of its early software, was first developed by IBM. Sensing a lucrative emerging market, in 2009 IBM representatives visited various Chinese cities to promote the concept. In Hangzhou, the China Electronics Technology Group Corporation was intrigued, and went on to build the centralized data platform that has improved Hangzhou residents' quality of life—the same platform that the police now use to round up and unlawfully detain Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Should IBM be held responsible? And if so, how?

For its part, the U.S. government has begun placing restrictions on U.S. hardware making its way to China. In early October 2022 (right after *Surveillance State*'s publication), the U.S. government issued sweeping regulations that bar U.S. companies from selling high-end chips, tools, and talent to China. But the new rules fail to address the role that American venture capitalists and investors play in the development of China's surveillance state. As recently as 2019, American investment funds, retirement systems, and universities were still pumping money into SenseTime and Megvii, two Chinese companies that provide technology to the Xinjiang police. As Chin and Lin more convincingly show, these investors can hardly claim ignorance. Two years earlier, SenseTime was proudly proclaiming its collaboration with China's public security apparatus. The Biden administration is aware of the problem and has even discussed tightening the rules on such investments. But it has yet to issue any formal guidance, likely in order to avoid further escalation of diplomatic tensions with China.

As we continue to witness the expansion of artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies, how can we ensure that its use resembles what's happening in Hangzhou and not in Xinjiang? As the CCP actively promotes its technology abroad, Western democracies are facing urgent questions about how to balance surveillance technology with human rights. At the moment, the United States appears paralyzed, with few laws, rules, or regulations governing surveillance and data-usage. It's also concerning that, as Chin and Lin point out, most Americans seem alarmingly comfortable with state-sponsored surveillance and data collection. Thus, Muslim-Americans after September 11, far-right extremists after January 6, and Black Lives Matter protesters following the 2020 killing of George Floyd have all been targets of state surveillance—with little backlash from the American public. In these last two instances, police used facial-recognition technology to identify and sometimes charge individuals. Was this legitimate?

We should certainly be concerned about what is happening with surveillance technology in China. But even more important is what is—and isn't—happening with such technology in the United States. The CCP has made its decision, and there's little the United States can do to interrupt it. Sanctions and restrictions won't accomplish much in the long run. As *Surveillance State* makes clear, what's really needed is a coherent alternative, a values-based framework that directs each stop of technological progress toward bolstering human rights and advancing the common good. But until the United States confronts its own inner divisions and contradictions, that's unlikely to happen.

ELIZABETH M. LYNCH *is the founder and editor of* China Law & Policy.

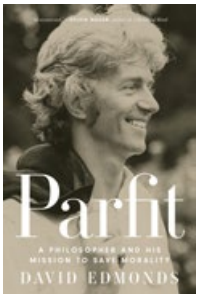
Is Ethics Like Math?

FRANK B. FARRELL

Philosophers today are typically unknown outside their discipline, but within it, Derek Parfit, who died in 2017, was considered one of the most important figures of the past fifty years. He had an extraordinary knack for revealing the hidden weaknesses of common moral theories. We may believe, for example, that an action is wrong only if it causes harm to particular individuals. But consider our relation to future generations. We might act well today to preserve the planet's ecology or we might act very badly in this regard. In the latter case, those who are alive a couple of centuries from now will have livable but much more difficult lives. It seems we will have failed in our moral duty to them. But Parfit argues that what makes a particular self is the joining of a particular egg and sperm at a particular time. Think of all the contingencies that might have made your parents meet later and have a different child instead of you. Then consider the future individuals who live centuries from now in a world created by our resource-depleting behavior. Without that very behavior and its ramifying consequences, these *particular* individuals would not have been around. Much more responsible behavior on our part would have changed history enough to generate a very different cohort of individuals. The ones in our thought experiment are surely better off than if they had never existed at all, so they cannot claim that we have harmed them. In short, one common theory about what makes our current behavior wrong, though intuitively appealing, is unconvincing.

That argument is quintessential Parfit. Reactions to his work often depend on whether one finds such arguments to be disturbing threats to our moral frameworks or merely the type of puzzle that sets certain kinds of minds in pleasurable motion. To take another example, consider a utilitarian ethical theory, one aimed at producing the best ratio of pleasurable states to painful ones. It seems we could get a superior utilitarian score if we kept increasing the earth's population to 20 or 30 billion individuals, so long as each new life added at least slightly more pleasurable states than painful ones. Such an outcome, Parfit says, is repugnant. He was interested in the kinds of actions, regarding environmental damage for example, that bring substantial benefit to an individual agent but at the same time harm millions of other people in ways that are too small to be either felt or measured. It is only when each action of this kind is combined with those of many other individual agents that the harm becomes measurable. Traditional ethical theories do not seem well designed for such cases.

Parfit did not wish to encourage moral skepticism; rather, he wanted to point the way toward a more adequate moral theory. He felt that we were just at the first stage of developing such a secular theory, now that religious and other implausible metaphysical frameworks had finally been abandoned. He was what philosophers call a non-naturalist cognitivist. That is, he believed there are ethical truths to be discovered in the way that there are mathematical truths to be discovered, but that these are not reducible to what we can learn from scientific evidence and experimentation. He felt strongly that



PARFIT
A Philosopher and His Mission to Save Morality

DAVID EDMONDS
Princeton University Press
$32 | 408 pp.

Derek Parfit's "life was, in some respects, a peculiar one."

his own life, and human life in general, would be completely meaningless if there were not such a valid ethical theory. And he believed that moral values cannot depend simply on what we happen to find ourselves valuing.

Parfit liked to use rather contrived thought experiments (cloning, teleportation, split-brain surgeries, and the like) to test our intuitions about personal identity. He concluded that personal identity has no deep basis, may depend on arbitrary choices that cultures make in the future, and in the end is not of paramount importance. We may have reason to desire the continuation of mental states that we value, but whether one's self continues should not be a matter of overriding concern. For Parfit, the boundaries between selves were less important and less rigid than we commonly suppose, so that our concern for others is not that different in kind from our concern for ourselves. In fact, one person may identify more with another than with an earlier stage of herself, so why insist on the importance of personal identity or its continuity over time?

Derek Parfit was born in Chengdu, China, to British missionary doctors. Back in England his parents used their spare resources to provide young Derek with a privileged British education: the Dragon School, Eton, and Balliol College, Oxford. He then won competitive fellowships that allowed him to stay at All Souls College, Oxford, for more than forty years, with his daily needs taken care of, with no classes to teach, and with other superior minds to challenge his philosophical positions in discussion groups. Parfit lost his religious belief when very young because he could not accept a God who punished sinners in hell. To believe in a determinist universe, he held, is to acknowledge that our moral-reactive attitudes (praise, blame, shaming, punishment, reward, gratitude, resentment, ostracism) are misplaced.

It is hard to imagine a more sympathetic, fair-minded, and appropriately skilled biographer for Parfit than David Edmonds. Parfit was co-advisor for Edmonds's BPhil, and Parfit's longtime partner, Janet Radcliffe Richards, was Edmonds's DPhil dissertation supervisor. Edmonds is now a Research Fellow at the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics at Oxford, produces the podcast *Philosophy Bites*, and is coauthor of *Wittgenstein's Poker*. As one would expect, Edmonds provides lots of details about Parfit's writings, prizes, and competitive entrance and fellowship exams at Eton and Balliol. But he has also collected many revealing anecdotes from those who knew Parfit well.

Edmonds nicely balances the narrative of Parfit's life with lucid accounts of his ideas, and that balance is important because the life was, in some respects, a peculiar one. Parfit felt that discovering the true ethical theory was so urgently important that he often kept to his room and did not engage in the kind of socializing expected of All Souls Fellows. A female colleague he had known for two decades was dying of cancer and asked him to dinner; he declined the invitation, saying he was too busy with his work. His partner, Radcliffe Richards, said she was always "a side show in his life." His only real interest outside of philosophy was an annual trip to either Venice or St. Petersburg, where he would take panoramic long-exposure photographs of famous buildings. Yet he could be remarkably generous when it came to engaging philosophically with others. An unknown student might send him a thirty-page paper and be shocked to receive, in short order, a forty-page single-spaced reply. Near the end of his book, Edmonds proposes the possibility that Parfit was on the autism spectrum; he certainly seems to have been unusually poor at recognizing social cues.

One might object to Parfit's intellectual project that ethics is not the sort of thing that can yield a systematic theory. There are many goods that a human community might value: liberty, equality, well-being, notable excellence, aesthetic and intellectual achievement, wealth, and so forth. Deciding among these is more like negotiating among factions of a complex political coalition than like discovering a scientific theory. A valid scientific theory replaces its precursors; they become obsolete. By contrast, we should wish to keep alive a range of diverse ethical resources from different eras, both philosophical and literary, that will aid us in thinking about how we ought to act and what a good life consists of. The thought experiments of Parfit are modeled on the laboratory experiments that physicists arrange. But the analogy fails: the artificial, contrived nature of the moral thought experiments means that we are not dealing with the kind of ethical decision-making that real individuals actually engage in. Finally, ethics is also about how to live a life that possesses integrity, character, and a distinctive style; a life is not just the site for the performance of moral or immoral acts.

Parfit may have been right that moral truths are not simply projections upon the world of whatever we happen to value. As we evolve culturally and come to know the world better and to reflect on our place in it, we *discover* certain things about what is worth valuing. But it is a long way from that claim to the kind of strong objectivity that Parfit desires. Our biological and cultural heritage will remain relevant to the values that we filter out from our experience as most important. Parfit's heroes were Henry Sidgwick and Kant. He might have challenged himself by becoming more familiar with Aristotle and Nietzsche. The former thought deeply about the ethical importance of habit and social context; the latter showed how one's highest intellectual achievements may have roots in unconscious features of one's character. Parfit does not seem to have reflected adequately on how his own personality and upbringing, as Edmonds describes them in this excellent biography, might have made him prefer one kind of "objective" morality over others.

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Brandon Taylor

Too Late for Grace?

ANTHONY DOMESTICO

THE LATE AMERICANS
A Novel

BRANDON TAYLOR
Riverhead Books
$28 | 320 pp.

"I feel seen." Spend time on social media and you're likely to come across this expression. Often, it's used in a joking fashion. I'm a thirty-eight-year-old literature professor who tries, unsuccessfully, to win his students over by referring to the latest Taylor Swift album. Later that day, I see a GIF of the actor Steve Buscemi pretending to be a high schooler on an episode of *30 Rock*. "How do you do, fellow kids?" the GIF reads, as Buscemi, fifty-five-years old, moseys over to some teenagers, skateboard slung over his shoulder, baseball cap on backwards. Immediately I tweet out the image: "I feel so seen."

The expression also can be, and often is, used with great seriousness, usually with regard to issues of identity and representation in art. To offer one example, in 2021 Lin-Manuel Miranda posted on Twitter about the origins of his musical *In the Heights*: "I started writing In The Heights because I didn't feel seen. And over the past 20 years all I wanted

HAOLIN XU

Taylor's novel is hot after blessing, beauty, and meaning even while it often finds the world hurtful, ugly, and empty.

was for us—ALL of us—to feel seen." In this context, to feel seen is to have your experience or identity reflected back to you. Through this reflection, your experience or identity is publicly acknowledged. Through this public acknowledgment, your experience becomes—or at least feels, and feeling is the barometer here—more *real*.

This understanding of the relationship between identity and art—namely, that art is in the service of identity—is one of many vexing aesthetic and philosophical issues explored by Brandon Taylor in his new novel, *The Late Americans*. The book follows a rotating set of grad students—poets, dancers, musicians, mathematicians—all living in Iowa City (Taylor himself attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop), most of them gay (Taylor is, too), several of them Black (like Taylor). This makes the novel, Taylor's second, seem like a work of autofiction, but it's not. As the Jamesian title indicates, Taylor is after something different and more traditional. *The Late Americans* is a novel of finish and style. It sees fiction not as serving identity but as exploring issues of moral concern. It's hot after blessing, beauty, and meaning even while it often finds the world hurtful, ugly, and empty.

Taylor's characters want to be seen: not in the way that "being seen" is talked about on social media but in the way that theologians use words like providence and grace. His characters long to have the very hairs on their head numbered, to have their lives matter, even while they doubt that such loving attention is forthcoming. They desire what the writer Joy Williams calls "that great cold elemental grace" yet fear that they've come too late for their desire to be satisfied.

The book opens with a graduate seminar in which a student's poem, "Andromeda and Perseus," is being workshopped. Every detail of the scene is perfect: the workshopped piece itself (featuring "a graphic description of period sex in which menstrual blood congeals on a gray comforter," the poem "reversed the title of the Titian painting in order to center Andromeda's suffering rather than the heroics of Perseus"); the rapturous and bullshitty responses it elicits ("I want this in my veins. Hard," one student says; "I love the gestural improvisation of it all—so very Joan Mitchell," another enthuses); and the one disgruntled student, Seamus, who is having none of it. "This was the aping of poetry in pursuit of validation," he thinks. He finds "Andromeda and Perseus" symptomatic of an increasingly common kind of poetic failure: "personal history transmuted into a system of vague gestures toward greater works that failed to register genuine understanding of or real feeling for those works. Self-deceptions disguised as confession." Finally, Seamus can't hold it in any longer: he asks another student, Ingrid, "Are you a poet or a caseworker?"

> "What the fuck did you just say to me?"
> Such withering piety, such righteous fury.
> He delighted in Ingrid's façade cracking.
> "It's not a gendered term—unless you think it is. Now that would be sexist."

The whole scene is about feeling seen. The poet wants to center female suffering over male heroism; those in workshop who respond enthusiastically are all women; the one who doesn't is white and male. No one comes off well. The poem sounds ridiculous, the workshop participants seem silly, and Seamus looks like a troll. The poem seems an aesthetic failure in part because it imagines that good ethical intentions and appeals to identity are sufficient in a work of art. Seamus is an ethical failure because he can't see the ugliness of his own actions.

If *The Late Americans* opens by showing how empty an identity- and experience-based aesthetic can be, it also relies for its effectiveness upon the reader's familiarity with the world of grad-school seminars. I found many of the novel's details delightful precisely because they reflected my own experiences back to me. A character remembers someone from college, "a lacrosse player from Vermont. They called him Tex for reasons [she] could no longer remember. That was how it was in college, she thought. You lived so far outside the context of your life that names stuck to you in a way that they would not have otherwise." (For reasons lost to memory, my friends and I called someone in our dorm "Doog" rather than "Doug" for four years.) At another point, a character remarks, "The wine was decent, which was just the sort of thing that people in graduate school said about wine.... Not quite damning the wine they drank, but withholding approval." (In my grad program, conference papers were "solid," films "entertaining.") Faux-radical poems, seminar jerks, conversation as a continual attempt to "prov[e] that one possessed the faculty of discernment": reader, I felt seen.

The Late Americans isn't really a novel but a novel-in-stories. Characters glanced at in one story-length chapter become

the focus of another before receding into the background of yet another. First, we spend time in the close third-person perspective of Seamus, the trollish poetry MFA student. He has a single violent sexual encounter with an older man named Bert and meets another young man named Fyodor at a bar. In a later chapter, we're with a dancer named Noah, who has more regular—but just as violent—sexual encounters with Bert and spends time with Ivan, a one-time dancer and current MBA student. In another chapter, we're with Ivan, who is dating Goran, a piano student, who in a later chapter invites Timo, Fyodor's boyfriend, to drinks. Characters come together (often physically: there's a lot of sex), drift apart, and come back together in new configurations. An acquaintance becomes a friend becomes a lover becomes a friend again. As Seamus puts it at one point, "He had the sense that he was in the middle of some great machine. They each were a widget that could be swapped in and out with hardly any trouble at all."

At times, the novel's combinatorial energy makes it difficult to keep things, and characters, straight. (Little is straight in this novel.) Is Daw the painter or the dancer? He's sleeping with Noah; did he also sleep with Goran? Having finished the novel, I'm not sure that I could answer such questions. In the actual reading, though, the distinctions are clear, in part because of how Taylor attends to markers of difference: race, certainly, but also class. This novel considers intimacy of various kinds—the intimacies of sex, art, and violence—and it knows that intimacy is deformed and transformed by money: "They were both graduate students, Goran in music and Ivan in finance, but Goran had family money. That was the beginning and the end of their trouble. Money made things easier, in one sense, when you had been raised without it. Like the first good gulp of air after a long run. But then came the burn." Taylor knows how class shapes character: "Timo had come up in the so-called Black Upper Middle Class in D.C., but what differentiated this from the regular Upper Middle Class, meaning *white*, was that there was less money and the money was less durable on the whole."

When one is in a relationship, such differences seem absolute. Yet one of Taylor's many gifts is his ability to move from this intimate perspective to a wider angle, showing how all his characters long, in one way or another, for meaning in a world that seems leached of it. Ivan thinks, "When he was a dancer, he'd known what to ask of himself, but now he felt unformed and unyoked. What was he to do with himself now and forever?" Timo reflects on quitting dance and the ache it left behind: "He had loved it very much, but in a way that was difficult to describe. It was apophatic—he could only describe it through its negation." Seamus thinks of what it means to "submit" poems for publication: "*Submission*. That was what they called it when you sent your work out. When you put your neck on the block and awaited the cold clarity of the blade. You had to believe in the eternal. What came next, after they lopped your head off and hoisted it high in celebration. You had to believe that, in that moment, you became something greater, grander, larger. Submission required belief." Though Taylor's characters aren't religious believers, they are haunted by the things religion once seemed to offer. They seek grace—in art, in sex—that they don't expect to receive.

The Late Americans continually sets its characters' Midwestern lives against something greater, grander, larger. In this way, though not in most others, it echoes another great Iowa novel, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. At one point, that novel's narrator, John Ames, remembers a passage from Calvin:

> Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense.... I do like Calvin's image because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little.

Early in *The Late Americans*, Seamus has a similar thought, though it offers him much less comfort:

> The stars, he thought, had been watching him his whole life. They'd seen the whole thing go on and on. Him and the rest of all the people who had ever lived and ever would.
>
> It was like living in a museum exhibit or a dollhouse. It was so easy to imagine the hands of some enormous and indifferent God prying the house open and squinting at them as they went about their lives on their circuits like automatons in an exhibit called *The Late Americans*. A God with a Gorgon's head peering down in judgment.

Ames's God delights in humanity; Seamus's God doesn't appreciate but judges. We might think that this is what it means to be belated. Whatever greater perspective beholds us, whether it be the stars or God, beholds us now with coldness. But this sense of lives playing out against vastness need not be harrowing. As two of Taylor's characters shower together, the perspective widens cosmically:

> He had a feeling of being looked at, though, and it wasn't Stafford who was doing the looking. It was as if there were a pair of eyes gazing at him through the shower wall, through the bulk of the house, through the trees, on the other side of the lake and beyond that, too, farther still, across the Adirondacks, across the ocean, across sky, far and beyond, vaster and vaster. He felt that these eyes could see everything he did.

There remains in Brandon Taylor's work the ghost of belief: the hope, often thwarted but still existent, that coldness might become warmth, that lives might be meaningful, that indifference might turn into a deeper, more beautiful kind of being seen. ✡

ANTHONY DOMESTICO *is chair of the English and Global Literatures Department 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.*

MORTEN HØI JENSEN

What Will Survive of Him

Remembering Martin Amis (1949–2023)

On an equatorial summer day eleven years ago, I spent a few hours with Martin Amis in his home on Strong Place in Brooklyn's Cobble Hill neighborhood. Assigned to interview him about his latest novel, *Lionel Asbo: State of England*, I began at once by asking him about all his other novels instead. What did it feel like to write *Money*? Is it true that Marmaduke in *London Fields* was based on Christopher Hitchens's firstborn? On page 234 of *The Information*… and so on. Amis was very patient. He spoke movingly of Hitchens, who'd passed away just six months earlier, performed a memorable impression of a manic Robert Lowell, and recalled once running into his friend Clive James at a bus stop in London. "He was reading Tacitus… *in Latin*." When the interview was over, Amis and I smoked a cigarette in his backyard.

It would gratify me to say that, as I was ferried back out the front door, Amis and I tearfully embraced and promised we would see each other again soon. ("Bye, Mart!" "Bye, Mort!") That was certainly how things had gone down in my head the night before. (When he profiled Saul Bellow, in 1983, Amis described the interviewer's shaming desire for "the birth of a flattering friendship.") In reality, of course, I was merely another wild-eyed admirer, with my voice recorder and my shaking hands, asking Amis if he would mind signing a few books

Martin Amis in his Notting Hill flat, London, UK, circa 1986

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before I left. Anyway, my deplorably Danish sense of decorum precluded doing or saying anything that would embarrass us both. I thanked him for his time and shook his hand. I never met him again.

And yet Martin Amis's death this spring felt like the passing of a friend. His voice has been the soundtrack—the voiceover—to most of my adult life. I discovered his work when I was eighteen and have read at least two or three of his books once a year ever since. (In my tattered copy of *Money*, somehow still intact, I can see, like a secular Torah, eighteen years of marginalia and underlinings.) The obsessive devotion he inspired in his admirers was unique, I think. Never broadly popular in the manner of contemporaries like Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, or Kazuo Ishiguro, Amis was in some ways a writer's writer, a journalist's journalist, a critic's critic. How many drink-fogged nights have I spent in the company of fellow scribes, quoting his works from memory, all of us trying to out-Amis each other? How many copies of *Money* or *London Fields* or *The Moronic Inferno* have I pressed on friends, girlfriends, acquaintances, even strangers? How often, looking for the spark or flash of some better phrase, have I turned to *The War Against Cliché* or *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov*?

Surely one reason for this devotion is that Amis stirred a creative delight in his readers, an admiration for the startling inventiveness of his language. (Martianism, a brief and flashily metaphorical fashion in British poetry in the 1970s, is an anagram of Martin Amis.) He made you want to sound like him, which you couldn't, because no one wrote like him. Here, as an example, is a description of a New York cab driver, from the opening page of *Money*:

> My cabbie was fortyish, lean, balding. Such hair as remained scurried long and damp down his neck and shoulders. To the passenger, that's all city cabbies are—mad necks, mad rugs. This mad neck was explosively pocked and mottled, with a flicker of adolescent virulence in the crimson underhang of the ears. He lounged there in his corner, the long hands limp on the wheel.

Amis's best novels plume with language like this—slangy, stylish, dazzling in its fierce originality (crimson underhang!). At a Manhattan newsstand, a character takes his place at "the wailing wall of the pornography section." Later he drinks champagne and lets it soak into "the parched coral" of his tongue. Elsewhere we see a skyscraper "whose glassy lines climbed like a strip of film into the open blue"; a "burgundy dusk…slowly decanting itself through the high windows"; a hangover like "the terminal mutiny of [the] whole bodybag."

In his memoir *Experience*, Amis describes his father, the novelist Kingsley Amis, as "the hub of all humor and high spirits, like an engine of comedy," and recalls sitting in the room beneath the study where, one morning, Amis senior was writing his novel *Ending Up*: "So I could hear him that morning when, after an hour at his desk, he started laughing: the sound of a man succumbing, after a certain amount of resistance, to unshirkable amusement."

I think of that line whenever I'm curled up with *Money* or *London Fields* or *The Information*, his three finest, and funniest, novels. They are variously and vigorously comic. There is the cartoonish hyperbole: a car buried beneath "an igloo of parking tickets and birdcrap"; a drunk's nose "like a hemorrhaged strawberry." There is the nimble gift for paradox, as in this passage from *The Information*:

> [Richard Tull] no longer wanted to give up smoking: what he wanted to do was take up smoking. Not so much to fill the little gaps between cigarettes with cigarettes (there wouldn't be time, anyway) or to smoke two cigarettes at once. It was more that he felt the desire to smoke a cigarette even when he was smoking a cigarette. The need was and wasn't being met.

And then there are the endless digressions, the delightful inversions, the dashing one-liners ("When it came to kissing and telling, Keith was a one-man oral tradition.")

But perhaps the central reason for the devotion of Amis's admirers was his dedication to language and attendant critical vigilance. Shortly after making his literary debut with *The Rachel Papers* in 1973, Amis was hired by the *New Statesman*, where he became deputy to Claire Tomalin, whom he eventually succeeded as literary editor. As well as editing its back pages, Amis wrote the kind of insolent and caustic negative reviews every young critic aspires to. "The most consistently provocative thing about Iris Murdoch's new novel is its title," he began in his review of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. A novel by J.M.G. Le Clézio is "such a torment to read that one yearns for the kind of *nouveau-roman* pranking whereby (say) the final 150 pages are left blank in order to symbolize the void of late capitalism." *Tough Guys Don't Dance* by Norman Mailer is a "seething and sanguinary thriller written very fast by Mr. Mailer for a well-known reason. When, oh when, will all the kids grow up, all the wives remarry?"

Combined with the slick savagery of his early fiction, Amis's criticism saddled him with a reputation for being a "literary bad boy"—an epithet that kept following him around, despite not being very accurate. It suggested he was a poseur when in fact he was serious and studious. "My private life," he wrote in the introduction to *The War Against Cliché*, "was middle-bohemian—hippyish and hedonistic, if not candidly debauched; but I was very moral when it came to literary criticism. I read it all the time, in the tub, on the tube: I always had about me my Edmund Wilson—or my William Empson." With time, Amis's personal canon grew ever narrower (to the point where it seemed to include only Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov), but his early criticism is still exhilarating to read. It is a tonic for our flabby age of mutual admiration.

As Amis's novels expanded in style and scope throughout the 1980s and '90s, so did his nonfiction. "Take me to America," pleads a character in the early novel *Success*. Martin Amis obliged. Many of his best articles and essays were about American subjects: Republican Party conventions, the making of *RoboCop 2*, the rise of "gonzo" pornography. To

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all the gaudy excess of American culture he brought a wry, skeptical eye. His account of a visit to the Playboy mansion, collected in *The Moronic Inferno*, is a model of the form, the biting criticism folded in rich layers of verbal irony. Here is Amis on Hugh Hefner:

> Hef took the stage. For a man who never goes out, who rises at mid-afternoon, who wanders his draped mansion in slippers and robe (whose lifestyle, on paper, resembles nothing so much as a study in terminal depression), Hef looks good—surprisingly, even scandalously so.

That parenthetical is perfectly timed, perfectly weighted, and absolutely crushing.

In the novels and stories of this period—*Money*, *London Fields*, *Einstein's Monsters*, *The Information*, *Heavy Water*—Amis found he had a great deal to say about the late twentieth century. ("I am addicted to the twentieth century," says John Self, the narrator of *Money*, who is addicted to "fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs.") But in these fictions he said it sweepingly, grandiosely. His nonfiction, hemmed in by journalistic imperatives, often said it better. Writing about violence in movies or murders in Atlanta, the future of darts or poker in Vegas, Amis's pronouncements on the thrills and threats of modernity gained a moral weight they sometimes lacked in his fiction.

In the past two decades, following a few misadventures in political punditry, Amis wrote at length about the twentieth century's central horrors: the gulags (*Koba the Dread*, *House of Meetings*) and the Holocaust (*The Zone of Interest*). I confess I've never been able to resign myself to those books. Nervously appendaged with defensive acknowledgments or explanatory essays, they seem to me interesting but undeniable failures. Worst of all, they are failures of imagination. Consider this passage, from *Koba the Dread*:

> Accounts of the childhoods of the great historical monsters are always bathetic. Instead of saying something like, "X was raised by crocodiles in a septic tank in Kuala Lumpur," they tell you about a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a house, a home.

This is quite funny, and would have been funnier if one of Amis's fictional characters had said it, but it reveals an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to properly imagine the different constellations of factors that might produce a mass-murdering dictator. Similarly, Amis's Holocaust novel, *The Zone of Interest*, which is set in Auschwitz, quickly disintegrates into a familiar routine of gags and riffs. At one point, a lorry of corpses spilling onto the train tracks is likened to "a crew of ghosts being sick over a ship's side"—a cartoonish, Scooby Doo–like image.

I don't mean to suggest that Amis couldn't write seriously about politics or history. On the contrary, his essays on nuclear weapons are still deeply affecting in their outrage and alarm. The awful absurdity of the entire nuclear enterprise proved, in this case, an ideal subject. In "Nuclear City: The Megadeath Intellectuals," Amis interviews the relevant experts and nabobs in the Pentagon, where smoking is gloweringly frowned upon and disapproved of: "It seems discrepant that these connoisseurs of thermal pulse and superstellar temperatures, these fireball merchants and inferno artists should all go green at the sight of a Marlboro. But you are going to get discrepancies—comic, tragic, pathetic—when your subject is nuclear weapons." (For contrast, read Amis's account of his meeting with a diplomat at the Russian embassy: "We drank a lot of coffee and smoked up a storm.")

The most fruitful subject of his later years, however, turned out to be his own life, movingly recounted in *Experience* (2000) and *Inside Story* (2020). "Why should I tell the story of my life?" he asks in *Experience*. Because, as the son of a famous writer, he was always going to invite extra-literary interest (though the intensity of it must have surprised even him) and because so much of it was public already. "I want to set the record straight," he wrote, though doing so meant writing a novelistic autobiography and an autobiographical novel.

But the subject of these books is not really Martin Amis; it is other people: Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Saul Bellow, Christopher Hitchens, and Lucy Partington, Amis's murdered cousin. The style, too, is different. The visionary explosiveness of the middle years settled down into a gentler artistry. The comic genius of his earlier novels is still there, but it is tempered by a contemplative beauty. (In a wonderful footnote in *Experience*, Amis describes running into his brother Philip at the supermarket: "I was impressed by the sureness with which my peripheral vision identified him, by his shape and volume, as if there was a template of him in my mind which he alone could occupy.") In these books, Amis is, like the narrator of Saul Bellow's *The Bellarosa Connection*, a "walking memory file," the tender remembrances jostling against deeper revelations.

It is weirdly fitting that *Inside Story* turned out to be his last published book. He hinted at shorter fiction still to come, but in truth he'd already said his literary goodbyes ("Goodbye, my reader, I said. Goodbye, my dear, my close, my gentle.") In the novel's final pages, he wrote: "This is literature's dewy little secret. Its energy is the energy of love. All evocations of people, places, animals, objects, feelings, concepts, landscapes, seascapes, and cloudscapes: all such evocations are in spirit amorous and celebratory."

I'm not sure this is true of all writers, but it was true of Martin Amis. Only someone who loved life could have written about it with such comic force, in such electric prose.

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‘The Craic Was Mighty’

ISABELLA SIMON

The accordion player next to me has handed off his instrument and he’s step dancing on the pub floor, soles smacking heavily on the downbeats. It’s a Thursday night session in Manhattan’s East Village where musicians of all ability levels come to share traditional Irish music. I’ve never heard this particular tune before, but as the third repetition plays out, I’m playing along on my fiddle, picking up on its basic shape. The bar’s patrons are clapping and cheering; we musicians try to watch each other and the dancer at the same time. We don’t all know each other, but we all speak the same joyful language, one I’ve been learning in fits and starts for twenty years, first in lessons, now in traditional Irish sessions.

Like all languages, traditional Irish music has its own grammar. There are jigs, reels, airs, and waltzes, as well as polkas, slip jigs, and hornpipes. There’s the switch between one reel and the next, the rhythm of a set of tunes played together. It’s looser and more improvisational than the classical violin style I spent most of my childhood and teenage years learning. Success as a fiddler is measured less by technical virtuosity than by whether the listeners are tapping their feet. If the violin sings, the fiddle dances; the focus is on participation rather than perfection. As

A fiddle and concertina together at an Irish session

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flute player and poet Ciaran Carson wrote in *Last Night's Fun*, a collection of essays about traditional Irish music, "Where tunes are concerned, there is no final version. The notion of correctness is anathema."

As an aural tradition, Irish music has infinite variations. Every set in every session is different. Unless I make a recording, I know I'll never hear the same reels played the same way again, even if I play with the same musicians. There's a certain bittersweetness to this fact: I can't recall the haunting tune taught to me by a visiting Peruvian fiddler whose name I don't remember, and there's no way for me to find it again. But more often I like the impermanence. It reminds me of how important it is to be fully present, and how connected I am to the particulars of each session. The jig I play, and the specific way I play it, joins me to the woman who taught it to me; and to the fiddler who taught my teacher; and to the musicians listening to me now, who might add it to their own constantly shifting repertoires.

Though we tend to revere soloists, music is a fundamentally communal activity. Playing on my own is always practice for playing with and for others. I played in an orchestra in college, and after I moved to New York, the city's extensive Irish session scene—people gather across the city to play every single night of the week—helped me feel less alone. Some of these sessions are more welcoming to beginners, while others cater to experienced players. All are anchored by professional leaders and mostly populated by regulars who return week after week.

When the dancer finishes, he returns to his accordion and to the banter that fills the downtime between sets. I used to shrink from these moments, which can feel awkward—without the music, what connects us? But tonight, two fiddlers reminisce about playing in the Bronx forty years ago, staying out until ten in the morning, their fingertips black from pressing so hard on the fingerboard for so long ("the craic was *mighty*"). One of the regulars, Mimi, has ordered soda-bread scones for the whole table, which arrive slathered in butter and topped with homemade berry jam. The waitress comes over to collect glasses and stays to sing a delicate rendition of "Wild Mountain Thyme." We join her on the chorus with unrehearsed harmonies. These moments help differentiate a session from a gig: we are here not to provide a program for pub patrons, but to foster a musical community. Many of these musicians have become my friends, and their musical preferences form part of our friendship. Hearing one of Rogan's favorite sets calls to mind her wry sense of humor, her loud "Hup!" signaling an upcoming transition between tunes, and the reel she introduces by four different names.

Some sheet music is available, but I've always learned Irish music by ear. Nobody at a session pulls out a music stand; we all learn by listening. Whenever I've taken lessons, my teachers and I have played each individual phrase back and forth until I master it, building the melody together, each adjusting to take into account the subtle differences of the other. It's not something I can easily achieve alone—playing along with recordings, my usual method of at-home learning, lacks the conversational, responsive quality of playing with another musician. And, because I can always replay a recording, it doesn't require me to *listen* with the same level of attentiveness. During a set, my ears and mind are always open. I'm not preoccupied with potential responses or counterarguments, waiting for my turn to shine or picking apart the flaws in another musician. Instead, I'm focused on processing what I've been given, seeking out its beauty, reflecting and responding as best as I can. I wish I could bring this careful attention to all my conversations.

No matter how carefully I listen, though, I'll never learn if I don't actually start playing along. I have to accept the inevitable imperfection of my first—and second, and third—attempts. Someone, if only my long-suffering roommates, will hear me muddling through the same three measures again and again, trying to correct the same mistake seven times in a row. (Carson again: "While there is no ultimate correctness in Irish music, there is wrong.") Even after I've practiced, bringing a set of tunes out into the world during a session is an exercise in vulnerability. I might fumble the transition. My fingers might slip. I might be distracted by an unexpected musician-turned-dancer in the pub. But my friends and teachers are generous and considerate. We strive to pay attention; we forgive each other when we fall short. The rewards always outweigh the risks: it's *fun* to play a new set, to be heard and to provide an opportunity for others to join in, to help create that moment of connection.

After my set comes another, and I try to catch hold of the tunes I don't recognize. After the session ends, I bike home along First Avenue and let the particulars of each piece blur into a warm glow in my mind. Next week, maybe one of these pieces will be performed again and I'll find myself playing along, plucking the memory of the tune from between my memories of dancing feet and laughter, hoping to play it just right but knowing that to play it at all is enough.

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REACH OUT YOUR HANDS

A translation of Herman Hesse's "Gib uns deine milde Hand!," 1919

Wally Swist

Reach out your hands to us.
Pulled apart too soon from our mother's clasp,
We range in darkness—
Children in a foreign country.
Sometimes when it is dark,
You lend a native inflection
To your wonderful voice, conferring
Light and consolation on an anxious journey.
Migrant without destination and path,
We drift in dark expanses;
Will you graciously guide us
Until the big morning comes.

WALLY SWIST'*s books include* Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love *(Southern Illinois University Press, 2012)*, Evanescence: Selected Poems, Taking Residence, *and* A Writer's Statements on Beauty: New & Selected Essays & Reviews *(Shanti Arts, 2020, 2021, 2022)*. *His poetry and translations have appeared in* Asymptote, Chicago Quarterly Review, Commonweal, *the* Montréal Review, Poetry London, *and* Rattle.

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