25 POLITICAL INFLUENCERS TO WATCH AS THE ELECTION NEARS

THE NEW REPUBLIC

May 2024

WINNING BACK WORKING-CLASS VOTERS

SEVEN WAYS JOE BIDEN CAN DO IT
TIMOTHY NOAH

"TO BE HONEST, I THINK BIDEN HASN'T DONE A LOT."
—JESUS SERA, RESTAURANT WORKER

A NIGHT IN RFK JR. WORLD
JUSTIN KLOCZKO

AI VERSUS THE WRITERS
SAMANTH SUBRAMANIAN

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the week.

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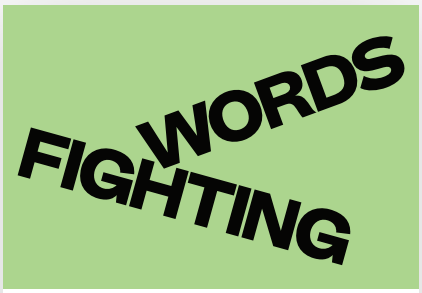

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

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—Stanley, TNR traveler

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TNR

Border Controls

The little-known, century-old law that helped make America's immigration system

By Felipe De La Hoz

Illustration by Mark Harris

AS RADICAL AS the contemporary GOP has become in recent years, it remains generally verboten in mainstream circles to openly call for murder. At least, for all but one demographic: migrants, whom Texas Governor Greg Abbott earlier this year lamented he couldn't order killed. At best, party officials might argue that they are disease-ridden freeloaders; at worst, that they're a demographic ticking time bomb engineered to wipe out real, white America.

This rhetoric has often been mistaken as a new turn for American political discourse, but it's more of a return to an earlier era, one cemented by a law signed a century ago this month by Calvin Coolidge: the Immigration Act of 1924, known as Johnson-Reed after its House and Senate sponsors.

In a 2015 interview with right-wing operator Stephen Bannon, then-Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions spoke glowingly of the era set off by this bill that most listeners, and most Americans writ large, were probably unfamiliar with. In his languid drawl, he described an era that "created really the solid middle class of America, with assimilated immigrants, and it was good for America."

What this meant, in practical terms, was a system geared toward prioritizing the immigration of white Northern Europeans in direct response to the heyday of Southern European immigration at the turn of the century. This was accomplished through a national immigration quota of only 2 percent of any given country's immigrant population in the United States as of the 1890 census—right before recent waves of European arrivals—and effectively banned Asian immigration entirely. In doing so, the law codified ethnic preferences, and was soon bolstered by the newly created Border Patrol. In effect, the United States of 1890 was

PHOTO REFERENCE: AP PHOTO; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY; DEAN CONGER/THE DENVER POST/GETTY; MARIO TAMA/GETTY; JOHN MOORE/GETTY

the one that was to remain, untainted by the now-romanticized steamships at Ellis Island.

Two years after this interview, Sessions became Donald Trump's first attorney general, making him the de facto top appellate decision-maker of the immigration court system. There, he leveraged a little-used review power to remake immigration courts in his restrictionist image, as one of several Trump-era immigration policy hawks who looked to the lessons of a century ago to guide their thinking. Among them was Stephen Miller, the administration's chief architect of anti-immigrant filth and a one-time communications director for Sessions; in leaked emails of his 2015 communications with right-wing journalists, Miller references the law repeatedly, at one point writing that they should "remind people about the heritage established by Calvin Coolidge."

Insofar as the general public knows anything at all about immigration policy, it's probably relatively recent legal efforts: this year's Senate border deal, or longtime efforts to protect people brought illegally to the country as children. Maybe they're aware of the 1986 amnesty signed by Reagan, or the significant expansion of detention and deportation enacted under Clinton 10 years later.

Yet the fundamental template for how immigration policy is written, communicated about, and implemented, how it's discussed in Congress and exists conceptually in the minds of lawmakers and voters alike, traces back to Johnson-Reed. "In a huge amount of the basic structure of immigration law and policy and the debate over it, you can see 1924 as a central inflection point for that," said Ahilan Arulanantham, co-director of the Center for Immigration Law and Policy at the UCLA School of Law.

It was born out of the maturation of the openly racist eugenics movement, which emphasized now-debunked theories around increasing the quality of humans by ensuring the preservation of genetic desirability. Representative Albert Johnson, the legislation's House sponsor, once appointed an "expert eugenics agent" to the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, which he chaired. In justifying his legislation, he fretted that "our capacity to maintain our cherished institutions stands diluted by a stream of alien blood." A hundred years later, Donald Trump would make headlines for doubling down on his assertion that immigrants were "poisoning the blood of our country."

Johnson-Reed updated a law from three years earlier that set similar quotas at 3 percent of any nation's 1910 census population. The 20-year change in cutoff was debated extensively in the run-up to Johnson-Reed's passage, and the 1890 adjustment won out for a simple reason. "The Emergency Quota Act was not strict enough from a nativist perspective," said UC Berkeley historian and author Hidetaka Hirota. There was still too much room for "Italians, Jews, Greeks, Slavs, those European immigrants considered inferior, weaker stock."

The quota system would eventually be repealed in 1965 with the passage of the second Immigration and Nationality Act, one of the final and less heralded triumphs of the civil rights movement. The act still forms the basis of our current immigration system. Yet Johnson-Reed left its residue, a lingering conviction that a bad stock of immigrants would be a cultural and political poison pill decaying the exceptional character of an ascendant United States.

"Legend has it that the way [Lyndon] Johnson, a pretty effective arm-twister, sold it to the liberal Democrats [was] that it was consistent with civil rights, eliminating discriminatory provisions," said Paul Wickham Schmidt, a professor at Georgetown Law and a former chief appellate immigration judge who began working in the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the 1970s before becoming the agency's acting general counsel. "Meanwhile, he told Southern and Western Democrats: Don't worry, this really isn't going to change anything. Who can apply for family-based [immigration] except people whose families are already here? And those are all our white, European, longtime ancestors."

If that residue grew lighter over the intervening years, it's reemerged today in the so-called great replacement theory. The right-wing concern that unimpeded immigration is engineered to diminish and eventually supplant white political and social power has conclusively moved from a whisper at the edges of the insurgent alt-right to practically become GOP doctrine.

Johnson-Reed also helped usher in the lasting phenomenon of policy contorting itself to satisfy the twin imperatives of keeping undesirables out while extracting their labor. Despite some strong anti-Mexican sentiment on the House and Senate floor, "those nativist sentiments, those racist voices, were ultimately [overridden] because of the more predominant demand, stronger demand for Mexican labor," said Hirota. "It really established this idea that the Mexicans were not desirable as people, as members of

ANDY BUCHANAN/AFP/GETTY

NEVER FORGET

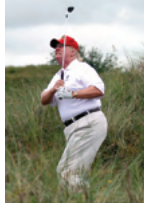
A brief look back at the chaos of Donald Trump's White House at this time five years ago.

TRAGEDY

On May 22, the Trump administration was forced to admit that a 10-year-old migrant girl had died in federal custody in September. Her death was the first of a migrant child in government hands since 2010. "I have not seen any indication that the Trump administration disclosed the death of this young girl to the public or even to Congress," Texas Representative Joaquin Castro said at the time. "And if that's the case, they covered up her death for eight months, even though we were actively asking the question about whether any child had died or been seriously injured."

FARCE

On May 15, Trump, who spent one of every five days in 2019 playing golf, posted an eye-catching 68 on a difficult course in New York, setting off yet another round of speculation about the extent of his sporting integrity. The month prior, sportswriter Rick Reilly had published a book alleging that the president, who claimed an impressively low handicap of 2.8, was an inveterate cheat. "He cheats like a mafia accountant," Reilly said. "He cheats crazy. He cheats whether you're watching or not. He cheats whether you like it or not."



FASCIST

On May 13, Trump became the first president to host Viktor Orbán in the Oval Office, treating the Hungarian prime minister to a chummy meeting of the authoritarian minds. Orbán, Trump gushed, had done a "tremendous" job. "I know he's a tough man, but he's a respected man. And he's done the right thing, according to many people, on immigration," Trump said about Orbán's restrictionist immigration policies. "And you look at some of the problems that they have in Europe that are tremendous because they've done it a different way than the prime minister."

—Jack McCordick

society in the United States, but the country needed the labor. So that's a compromise."

Much like the Chinese immigrants who built the transcontinental railroad and then found themselves the target of heavy-handed restrictions once the labor had been completed, Mexican workers who entered post-1924 to prop up massive agricultural and industrial demand for labor would soon bear the brunt of the backlash. The Bracero Program of the '40s, '50s, and '60s all but guaranteed exploitation. As the population of Mexican immigrants increased, Dwight Eisenhower instituted the notorious Operation Wetback, which led to at least hundreds of thousands of deportations, including those of U.S. citizens (and which Trump reportedly views as a template).

That operation was conducted by the Border Patrol, which was created shortly after Johnson-Reed to actually ensure that this system of racialized preferences and controlled migrant labor was enforced. In the century since, the force has grown in size and authority to eventually become a large paramilitary organization with some 20,000 officers and—factoring in its parent agency, Customs and Border Protection—an arsenal that includes predator drones and sophisticated surveillance tools. CBP and the Border Patrol have been the frontline executors of both Trump- and Biden-era asylum restrictions, which are facilitated by the immigration system's relative insularity within the federal government.

That walling off is also to some extent a product of Johnson-Reed, according to Schmidt, who also worked on the aftermath of the 1980 Refugee Act and Reagan's 1986 amnesty and would eventually chair the Board of Immigration Appeals in the '90s, acting as the overseer of the immigration courts' appellate branch. Schmidt sees the law's staying power in not only the legal realm but the conceptualization of immigration as a separate animal with different due process standards, including in the very court system he once presided over. "That's still one of the arguments that opponents of an Article I independent court system make: This is too sensitive, controversial, and tied in with national security and other policies to allow it to just be treated by mere judges," Schmidt said. "You need politicos in there who can make sure nobody's giving away the store."

By the early twentieth century, the group of so-called Chinese Exclusion cases put the final nail in the coffin of state-based attempts to regulate immigration by recognizing Congress's implicit plenary power to do so and the president's role in enforcement. (Incidentally, the current Supreme Court opened that firmly closed door in March by allowing Texas to move forward with a law essentially establishing a state immigration enforcement system.)

Johnson-Reed sketched out, for the first time, a formal immigration superstructure with components that are recognizable today—immigration visas to be issued abroad and screened on arrival; expanded deportation powers; and, of course, a militarized Border Patrol to be the government's muscle—and put that superstructure in its own due process and constitutional category.

Insofar as the general public knows anything at all about immigration policy, it's probably relatively recent legal efforts.

"You'll find that in both constitutional law and administrative law, there are the rules, and then there's immigration, which is sort of its own thing, where things that you couldn't do in administrative law happen all the time," said Schmidt. "You'd probably have a due process problem if you treated people in traffic court or misdemeanor court the way we treat asylum-seekers in immigration court."

Unlike the earlier Chinese Exclusion Act, whose national-origin and race-based aims were made explicit in its title and language, Johnson-Reed does not specifically establish new national or race exclusions. "It really suspended all Asian immigration without using actual racial language. The key phrase is, 'those ineligible to citizenship' could not enter the United States. But then, if you look at the naturalization law, those who were not eligible for naturalization were Asians," said Hirota. This skirting right to the edge of making racial intent clear without stepping over the line has become a feature of policymaking around immigration, perhaps best exemplified by Trump's so-called Muslim ban.

Despite Trump's repeated and explicit promises to target Muslim immigration on the campaign trail, the Supreme Court ruled 5–4 in 2018's *Trump v. Hawaii* that the third version of the policy—which functionally suspended immigration from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and North Korea, with some restrictions on Venezuela thrown in to further muddy the waters—was not unconstitutional, because it did not specifically target Muslims in its text. "What they said is, basically: We'll make a standard of review which is so preposterous that we can actually close our eyes to the like thousand statements that Trump made before and during and after the campaign," said Arulanantham. "What they've done is they've made it basically impossible to challenge anyone unless they wrote in the executive order, 'we hate Muslims,' basically."

He and others saw pangs of Johnson-Reed's staying power in the disparate treatment of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's 2022 invasion. Within weeks, the Biden administration had directed border authorities to consider exempting Ukrainians from the still active Title 42 expulsion program, even as thousands of Venezuelans and others were turned away, and quickly instituted a specialized program as Afghan refugees, left behind by America's messy withdrawal, floundered. "Biden is, I would say, an accomplice. He may not be so vocal as Trump, but essentially he inherited the whole system, and he continued the whole system and the policy. He hasn't really actively opposed anti-immigrant or nativist policies," said Hirota.

"The only large group of Europeans who have tried to get in [recently] were Ukrainians, and they weren't the ones who were living under bridges, stuck for years waiting for [the] CBP One [app] to work a miracle of miracles. They figured out a way to get the Ukrainians in fairly quickly. That shows that the system could work if there were really motivation to make it work," said Schmidt, referencing the system for migrants to navigate Biden's reinstatement last year of a Trump-era asylum restriction policy. Now, the president is reportedly considering heavy-handed executive actions to restrict new arrivals.

"Those of us that sort of thought the '24 act was in the rearview mirror, you know, I think we've been proven wrong," the former immigration judge added. INK

Felipe De La Hoz *is an investigative and explanatory reporter focusing on immigration.*

MICHAEL TULLBERG/GETTY IMAGES

Shamalot

A night in Los Angeles with Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s die-hard supporters

By Justin Kloczko

WHEN ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR. walked past us, orbited by a force field of security and advisers on a Wednesday evening in Los Angeles, no one really noticed. Instead, the crowd inside the Million Dollar Theatre had its attention locked on the stage, where the long-shot presidential candidate was giving a pretaped speech.

"I've come here today to declare our independence from the tyranny of corruption, which robs us of affordable lives, our belief in the future, and our respect for each other," droned a video playing Kennedy's October 2023 speech announcing he would be running for president as an independent. "But to do that, I must first declare my own independence—independence from the Democratic Party."

The audience, here for a comedy fundraiser hosted by RFK's wife, the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* actress Cheryl Hines, was rapturous. Wearing a TED Talk headset microphone, his gaze stern, RFK told us that we are, in a nutshell, fucked. And the only way to break free was to make him president.

It was a dark message: All of us are prisoners of a corrupt system—even the elites. "They, too, want liberation from the system that has captured them," Kennedy said.

To the Democrats, he's a uniquely destructive force: not just Ralph Nader in 2000 but a deranged vaccine conspiracist hoping to undo a century of medical advancement. To Republicans, he's a UFO on the verge of abducting just enough anti-vaxxers to steal the presidency from Donald Trump. And to a certain type of person, he's the truth.

Kennedy has drawn unexpectedly high poll numbers as an independent candidate for the general election. In some polls, RFK is the most popular candidate among young voters. One Quinnipiac University survey showed him getting 22 percent in a three-way general election against Joe Biden and Trump. Another revealed higher favorability ratings against Trump or Biden. At least one poll has shown RFK leads in support from those under 45. Here, in Los Angeles, he's trying to make the case that he really is a serious presidential candidate—and that he can raise the money a serious presidential campaign needs.

RFK is not a funny person, but comedy was the theme of the fundraiser. That alone was strange, and presented a sort of cognitive dissonance for the evening. The jokes weren't funny, but everything else was. The believers were out in full force, a band of political outcasts from the right and left. Kennedy was their new master. Even though this was L.A., the crowd wasn't your classic set of Hollywood liberals. It appeared to draw mainly from neighboring Orange County, the historically conservative red bruise on sky-blue California. One attendee, Derrel Young, told me, "If you're looking for the Hollywood crowd, this is not it." Instead, the event conjured a mirage of Hollywood support, featuring has-been comedians such as Adam Carolla and Rob Schneider, who have taken to railing against cancel culture as their careers have nose-dived.

The event attracted classic environmentalists and people who loved the Kennedys no matter what they did, but it also brought out new age hippies with a lot of money; Joe Rogan hypebeasts; anti-establishment troublemakers; and free-speech, anti-vax obsessives—the candidate's base, in other words. It was a young crowd as far as political events go. A member of one of the most storied political dynasties in history—privileged and damaged—was now one of theirs. He might be crazy, but he was their kind of crazy. If you are to believe the cosmos, as many people in L.A. do, Pluto has entered Aquarius for the first time since the American Revolution, igniting a time of great tumult. Conspiritualists have forecasted 2024 as a revolt. The figure bringing that to bear for them is Kennedy.

FOR ALL THE talk of Kennedy as a presidential spoiler, there are a number of big, unanswered questions about his campaign. It's not even clear how many state ballots his name will appear on. So far, he says he has enough signatures to appear on the ballot in Utah, Hawaii, New Hampshire, and Nevada, a crucial swing state that saw less than a 3 percent margin between Trump and Biden in 2020. Meanwhile, a super PAC supporting RFK Jr. says it has enough signatures to add his name in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and South Carolina.

A big part of his allure is pretty simple. According to a focus group of Detroit voters conducted by Breaking Points and J.L. Partners, people gravitate toward RFK Jr. for two reasons: He's a Kennedy, and he's got anti-establishment appeal. He's also not Trump or Biden, which helps in

an election where loads of people detest both candidates.

If you are to believe polling and pundits from both parties, Kennedy is a unique threat to the republic because he's getting in the way of a Democratic Party re-coronation or Trump's second coming. Much of Kennedy's fundraising and polling support come from people who have supported Trump, such as classic Reagan Republican and financial tycoon Timothy Mellon, who gave RFK Jr. $15.5 million last year.

The weirdness of Kennedy's base—Reagan Republicans and environmentalists holding hands with anti-vaxxers—makes it difficult to assess precisely what type of spoiler he is. With RFK on the ballot, a March Harvard CAPS-Harris poll found, Trump's lead increases over Biden by 1 point. Trump scored 44 percent to Biden's 37 percent, while Kennedy raked in 18 percent. Still, it's also plausible that RFK Jr. could end up tossing the election to his former party, becoming a sort of Nader in reverse.

RFK Jr.'s big money funding comes from a smattering of tech evangelists, former Democrats—including tech attorney Nicole Shanahan, whom he named as his running mate on March 26, and who has been a major donor to his campaign—and entertainers, most well past their prime. Gavin de Becker, whose firm provides security for high-profile people, including the candidate himself, is the second-biggest donor to the RFK Jr. super PAC, American Values. Other backers include David Marcus, the former president of PayPal, and former Democratic financier-turned-Trump supporter Omeed Malik. RFK has also received support from some celebrities, such as Alicia Silverstone, Eric Clapton, and Oliver Stone. None of them got back to me to talk about their support.

A clearer picture of RFK's base emerged at his L.A. fundraiser. For $1,500, the event promised "seating in the first few rows," "a cool vibe and scrumptious bites," and a chance to rub shoulders with RFK, Hines, and the comics. In case the Kennedy campaign denied my request for press access, I signed up my family for a raffle to attend. We all won tickets.

A member of one of the most storied political dynasties in history—privileged and damaged—was now one of theirs. He might be crazy, but he was their kind of crazy.

People came from faraway places. Standing in line, dressed in full Navy regalia, 72-year-old Lt. Cmdr. Leonard Le Blanc III told me he had traveled 8,000 miles from Bangkok in hopes of meeting RFK. "Given Mr. Kennedy's interest in the deep state," Le Blanc said, "I'd want to give him a copy of my book." It was about the military-industrial complex and the invasion of Iraq, a topic I'd hear a lot about over the course of the night.

Further down the line, a nice couple originally from Orange County told me they liked RFK because he spoke his mind.

"He's not afraid to tackle some really sensitive issues," Lisa Huett told me. She ranked the environment and vaccines equally as the two issues most important to her. Both she and her husband opted out of the Covid vaccine. "I just wanted more studies around it," she told me. "But we've had all of our childhood vaccines," her husband, Jason, added, as if to soften bad news.

They previously voted for Obama, then Trump during the last two elections. "But I'm not beholden to Trump," Jason clarified, citing the limit on tax deductions Trump enacted via the SALT cap.

Derrel Young, the L.A. resident whom I met earlier, came over to me with a friend named Jason. They both said they were here for the comedy.

"I'm just here to see somebody say something funny, and after that my ears are open," Young said.

"What do you think of this crowd?" I asked.

"There's a lot of white people here tonight," said Young, who is Black, smiling.

I walked into the theater and toward the front row, which theoretically was reserved for people who paid $1,500. There were a lot of empty seats, so I sat down.

"Our son's a heterosexual. We're dealing with it," joked comedian Mike Binder. People

MANDEL NGAN/AFP/GETTY

SPOT THE FAKE RIGHT-WING BOOK TITLE

Answer: *The Wettest From the Standpoint of Water*

laughed. I turned to get a look at them. They were having a great time.

Explaining why Cheryl Hines's TV husband wasn't in attendance, the comedian said, "We didn't want to spend the money to surgically remove Larry David from Barack Obama's ass."

And that was basically his whole bit. Most of the comedians that evening leaned into the culture wars, lobbing jokes toward the queer community, people of color, and the unhoused. Few, if any, were directed at Trump or the right. The main event was former *Saturday Night Live* cast member-turned-fedora guy Rob Schneider, who said conservatives have been afraid to speak up in Hollywood about cancel culture and vaccines. "I try and explain California to people," he said, prowling the stage. "You know, one day you drop off a boy at school and at the end of the day you pick up a girl." More laughs.

"They wanna pay slave reparations to people who were never slaves, to be paid for by people who never owned slaves, in a state that never had slaves. That's like paying child support for a child you never had to a woman you never fucked." I left to go to the bathroom. On my way back, I purchased a beer and checked my email. Kennedy was begging me for money. It sounded urgent. On Instagram he was going skydiving.

That evening, I'd heard about a range of issues that drew people to Kennedy: the deep state war machine, vaccines and free speech, the environment, and so on. There wasn't one thing that brought people out. It didn't seem like a left or right thing, a democracy versus fascism thing, or a class or identity thing. For these people, the common thread was us versus them, insiders versus outsiders. Populism is dead, and this is what's left: a populist who isn't really talking about the working class. A guy leveraging his famous name to try to convince lost people he can lead them out of the darkness.

Then RFK Jr. walked by and back to his seat. A woman burst out of the theater after he passed, crying. I asked her if she was OK and what was wrong.

"I am just honored to be near him," said the woman, leaking tears. Her name was Susan Dinsmore. "I'm such a liberal, MLK, anti-war person. I'm so tired of war and money going towards wars," she went on. Democrats and Republicans were no different when it came to funding war. "America could be such a great country, and we're not. To me, this is our last hope."

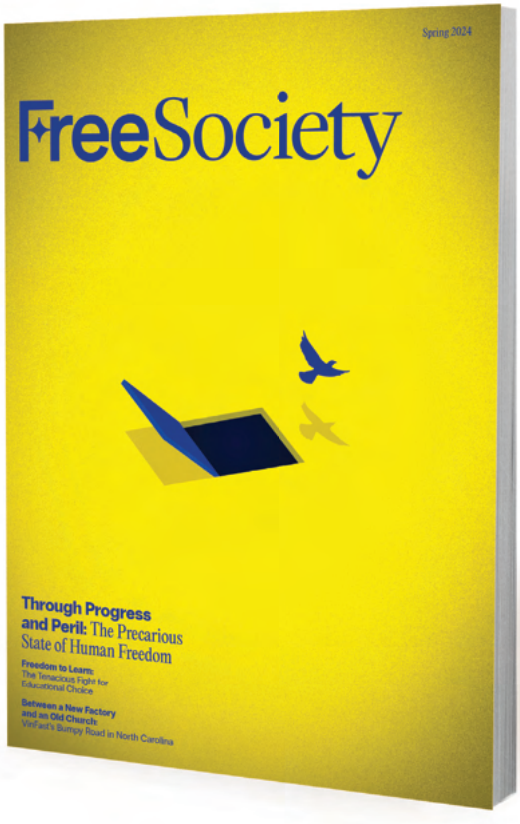
A San Fernando Valley native who worked for Whole Foods for 20 years, Dinsmore appeared to be one of those classic Kennedy liberals—an anti-war, pro–civil rights environmentalist—who was not turned off by RFK Jr.'s flirtations with the right. Instead, she saw him as a true liberal. It was the Democratic Party that had changed.

"I just think of his uncle and everything that happened was terrible. We had hope then." The tears returned.

Then she smiled.

"And he's so handsome." INR

Justin Kloczko is a journalist in Los Angeles. Find his stories at debaser.substack.com.



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The 10 Types of Dems Who Will Decide The 2024 Election

America's big-tent party is finding different ways to cope with a tense election.

By Walter Shapiro

Illustration by Wesley Merritt

JUST BECAUSE THE 2024 election may decide the future of American democracy doesn't mean that the race is riveting, let alone dramatic, six months before November 5. Each day of this campaign seems endless for Democrats desperately craving reassurance from polls, portents, or messages from the Delphic Oracle.

But the shocking truth (come close to the page so I can whisper this) is about all that we know at this stage is that the election will be very close. This you-can't-read-it-anywhere-else bombshell assessment is solely based on the fact that four of the previous six presidential races have been summon-the-election-lawyers tight.

This nerve-jangling uncertainty does have its value: It can serve as a Rorschach test revealing 10 common personality types of Democrats. We are a big-tent party when it comes to differing psychological ways of dealing with the specter of the Once and Future President Donald J. Trump. Here, in a draft paper originally intended for the American Psychoanalytic Association, is my typology of these Democrats:

The Poll Vaulters: Their slogan might as well be, "Have Crosstabs—Will Travel." They treat every new poll as if it were the Rosetta Stone. When *The New York Times* in early March led the paper for two straight days with dire-for-Biden poll results, it sparked a dramatic upsurge in airline reservations to Auckland, New Zealand, for January 20, 2025. Historically, polls in the early spring are about as accurate as a blunderbuss. But these poll-propelled Democrats are obsessed with every detail, from the size of a poll's sample to the partisan breakdown of left-handed voters with some college education. Sadly, a large proportion of political reporters suffer from the same malady.

Eeyore Democrats: They know that America is doomed, since they can already hear the sound of marching jackboots. These natural pessimists can take any event and turn it into new evidence that Trump will prevail. In their view, Mike Pence declaring that he would not endorse Trump in 2024 is an example of the Former Guy cleverly purging disloyal Republicans to strengthen the GOP for November. These depressives interpret every new economic indicator as bad news for Joe Biden. Advice for friends of such Eeyore Democrats: Never allow them to take a scenic walk, supposedly just for the exercise, across a high bridge.

Fox News Masochists: These Democrats take the military mantra, "Know your enemy," to ridiculous extremes. They watch Fox more often than an 84-year-old retiree in North Dakota who is convinced that immigrants are surging over the border solely to steal his hard-earned hoard of Bitcoin. Instead of reading polls, these long-suffering Democrats try to divine the political mood by watching the facial expressions of Fox News hosts when they talk about Trump.

Armchair Political Consultants: They have it all figured out based on gut instincts and regular viewing of *Morning Joe*. Their magic elixirs range wildly, from Joe Biden exclusively appealing to Nikki Haley voters to the president veering left to reassure the base. But what is consistent is the absolute certainty with which these would-be James Carvilles deliver their strategic pronouncements to anyone they encounter at the grocery store or the health club.

Democratic Media Critics: They are particularly assertive, since they have more than a dollop of truth on their side. It is undeniable that news organizations blunder into false equivalency by, say, likening a Trump rant threatening to destroy the Constitution with run-of-the-mill partisan invective from Biden. This produces anodyne headlines like, "PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDERS EXCHANGE BARBS." But these frightened Democratic media critics have lost all sense of proportion. They are obsessed with every sentence in every news story, especially in *The New York Times*. It is hard for them to grasp that a swing voter in Wisconsin will probably not be swayed by a dumb headline on page 19 of the print edition of the *Times*.

Head-in-the-Sand Democrats: This rare breed takes its inspiration from Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, who believed that "all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds." That's

We are a big-tent party when it comes to dealing with the specter of the Once and Future President Donald J. Trump.

a hard doctrine to follow for 2024, but you have to admire these oblivious Democrats for trying to maintain a smiley face. In their view, Trump cannot possibly win, because they don't know any Trump voters. And, besides, that sort of authoritarian triumph can't happen here. This mindset, by the way, appears to afflict the Biden White House.

Self-Absorbed Democrats: They are convinced that all politics revolves around them personally. Whether their animating cause is Gaza, student loans, or climate change, they are convinced that Biden's position on their pet issue will decide the election. As evidence, they cite all their friends who feel the same way. Of course, none of these Democrats live in a swing state. But they all do seem to believe that as goes Brooklyn, so goes the nation.

Doctors Who Forgot to Go to Medical School: The lack of formal credentials does not prevent these Democrats from making instant diagnoses every time Biden appears on the TV screen. Worried about the stamina of the 81-year-old president for the fall campaign, these ace diagnosticians, operating from afar, detect in Biden every known disease from advanced dandruff to the bubonic plague.

Contested Convention Dreamers: These look-to-the-future Democrats have always assumed Biden would not really run for a second term. Even when the president announced last year that he was running, these dreamers clung to their predictions. They then expected a Biden withdrawal as the dramatic close of the State of the Union address. Now, as a fallback position, they have convinced themselves that in mid-August, on the eve of the Chicago convention, Biden will react to dispiriting polls by bowing out of the presidential race. They can picture Biden saying, "I've fooled you for over a year. But I can no longer live a lie. I'm not running." In this cockamamie fantasy about a last-minute floor fight for the nomination, they join every political reporter who has been hoping to witness a second convention ballot sometime in their lifetime.

The Gimlet-Eyed Realists: These Democrats do not allow natural biorhythms dictating pessimism or optimism to determine their political expectations. They also realize that up-for-grabs voters in swing states are probably ignoring springtime political news because (gasp!) they feel they have better things to do. As a result, these Democratic realists take pains not to overreact to any political development while the trees are still budding.

There is just one problem: There are only three of these Democratic realists in existence—and I have my doubts about the other two. TNR

Walter Shapiro *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

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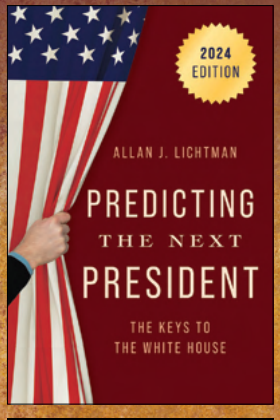

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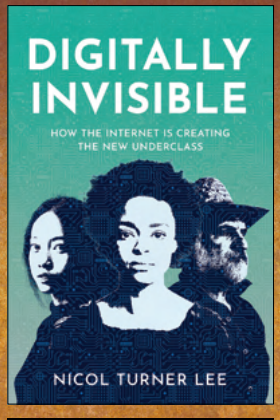

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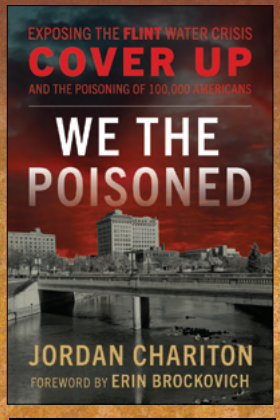

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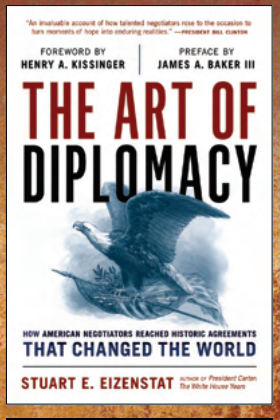

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YES, JOE BIDEN CAN WIN THE WORKING-CLASS VOTE

In 2020, Joe Biden barely lost it. But since then his support among working-class voters of all races has fallen alarmingly.

Here are seven ways he and his party can reverse the slide.

By Timothy Noah

Illustration by Gustavo Magalhães

Last year, a team working for Navin Nayak, president of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, the advocacy arm of the liberal nonprofit Center for American Progress, or CAP, reviewed a database containing every press release, tweet, and Facebook post from every House and Senate Democrat during the midterm election year of 2022. These added up to 570,000 individual communications. The goal was to quantify how frequently congressional Democrats addressed the economic concerns of working-class voters, traditionally the Democratic Party's core constituency, and to consider necessary adjustments for 2024.

The results were a bit of a shock.

The search words "workers," "wages," "jobs," "working families," and "costs," the CAP Action Fund researchers found, appeared in only 6 percent of the congressional statements. When you added "economy" and "economic," the search words appeared in only 11 percent of the documents. These were percentages you'd expect to see for Republicans, not Democrats. It was almost as though New Deal liberalism, once the Democrats' prevailing ideology, had stopped being an ideology at all but instead had become some ancient language, like Latin or Sanskrit, that Democrats no longer knew how to speak.

CAP Action Fund's findings were no outlier. The Center for Working-Class Politics, a small research group co-sponsored by YouGov and the socialist quarterly *Jacobin*, compiled its own database of 892 campaign websites, representing about 92 percent of all Democratic primary and general election candidates who ran for the House and Senate in 2022. The researchers found that fewer than 30 percent of the Democratic candidate websites mentioned the need for higher-paying jobs. Fewer than 20 percent mentioned the need for paid family and medical leave. Fewer than 10 percent mentioned the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, a bill to strengthen labor rights that a Democratic House passed in March 2021. About 5 percent mentioned a $15 minimum wage, perhaps the most politically popular economic policy of our time. Two months after the 2022 midterms, a poll by the nonprofit American Family Voices asked 600 likely voters living in industrial counties across six Midwestern states to name the top issues. "The rising cost of living" led, with 37 percent, because at the time the Consumer Price Index was twice what it is today. But ranking second was "jobs and the economy"—which Democratic candidates had avoided in the election.

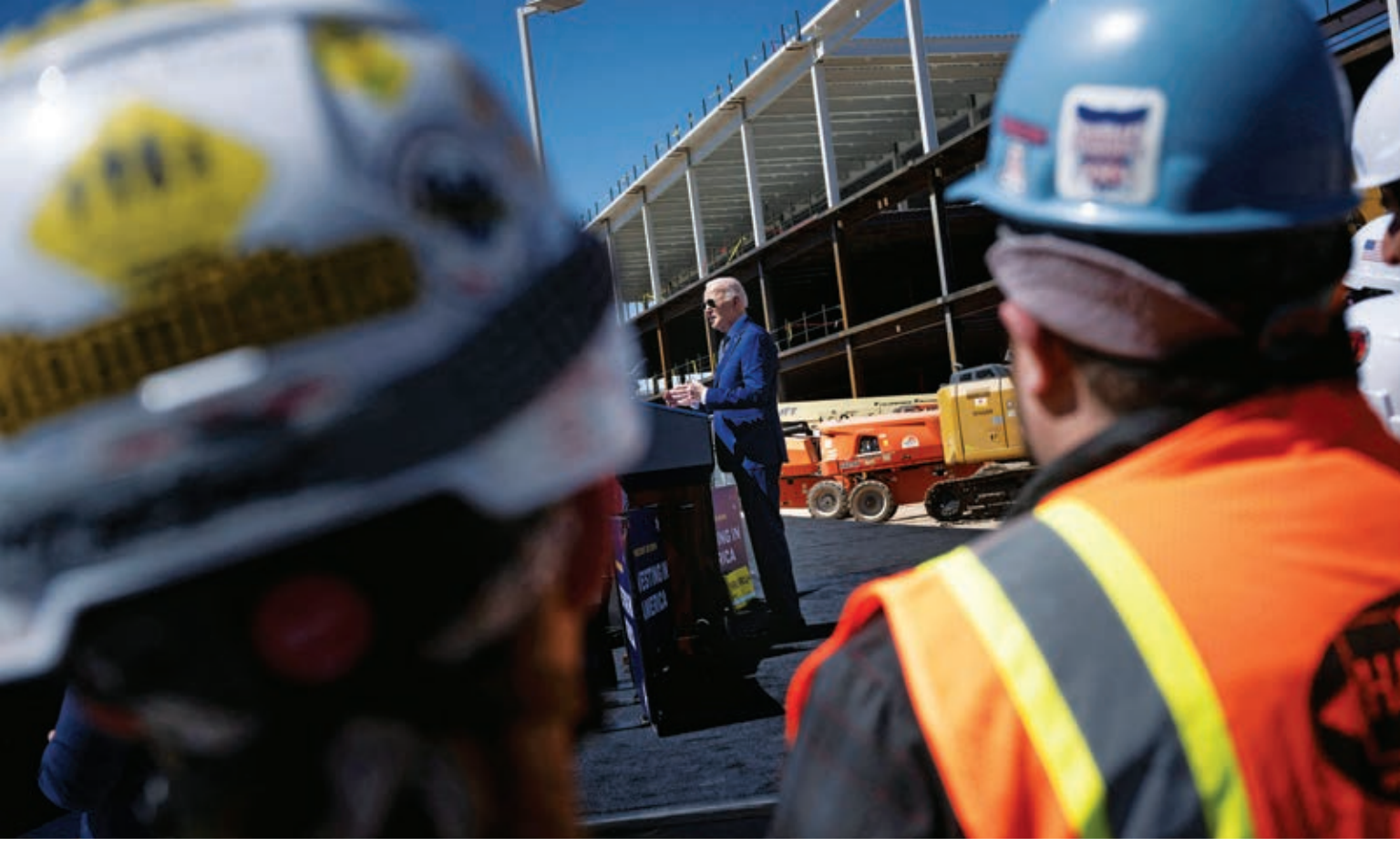
Don't blame President Joe Biden, who has lavished more attention on working-class issues than any president since Harry Truman (and considerably more than Biden's three modern Democratic predecessors Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter). Blame Biden's fellow Democrats. Only half of the Democratic-candidate websites surveyed by the Center for Working-Class Politics bothered to mention Biden's $1 trillion infrastructure bill. Only about one-quarter mentioned Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA, which is spending another half-trillion on technologies to reduce climate change. And only 15 percent mentioned the CHIPS Act, signed into law three months before the election, which will spend another $53 billion to boost domestic manufacture of semiconductors. The combined effect of these three bills has been to nearly triple the construction of manufacturing facilities since Biden took office.

Part of the Democratic reticence was perhaps attributable to Biden's low approval rating, then stuck around 40. Still, however unpopular Biden was (and remains), Biden's *policies* are very popular, especially among working-class voters—on those rare occasions when they hear about it. The IRA, for example, was favored in a March 2023 poll by 68 percent of people earning between $50,000 and $99,999. But these working-class people needed the pollsters (from Yale and George Mason) to first explain what the Inflation Reduction Act was. A 61 percent majority had no idea.

When Election Day 2022 came, the Democrats only lost nine House seats (about one-third of the usual for the governing party) and maintained a razor-thin majority in the Senate. Turnout was high, and Democrats mostly maintained their 2018 and 2020 gains in suburban swing districts by spotlighting Republican extremism, especially on abortion. But the Democrats' support among working-class voters—defined conventionally as "noncollege," that is, workers who possess a high school but no college diploma—slipped 5 percentage points compared to the previous midterm year of 2018. That included 7 points lost among noncollege Latinos and 5 points lost among noncollege African Americans.

Democratic House and Senate candidates still won, as they typically do, the noncollege Latino vote (61 to 38 percent) and the noncollege Black vote (86 to 13 percent). These two subgroups represent about one-quarter of the total noncollege vote. But the victory margins from these two groups were smaller than in the past. As for the noncollege white vote (which represents about 70 percent of the total noncollege vote, and which Democrats typically lose), the Democratic slippage in 2020 of only 3 percentage points compared with 2018 was actually less than the slippage among noncollege Black and Latino voters. That made it hard to attribute this more recent loss of working-class support to white racism.

To prevail in 2024, Biden will need to win the working-class vote. Over the past century, no Democrat—with one exception—has ever won the presidency without winning a majority of working-class voters. The single exception was Joe Biden in 2020; Biden lost noncollege voters that year to President Donald Trump, 47 to 51. That was slightly worse than Hillary Clinton did with noncollege voters in 2016. Biden performed better



President Joe Biden spoke at Intel's Ocotillo Campus in Chandler, Arizona, on March 20, as he unveiled nearly $20 billion in new grants and loans to spur U.S. chipmaking.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GETTY

than Clinton among noncollege whites, but 8 percentage points worse among noncollege Latinos and 3 percentage points worse among noncollege African Americans. Biden became president anyway, but under a unique set of circumstances—a deadly and economically costly pandemic that the incumbent mishandled badly. It's doubtful the president can remain an exception in 2024 and win reelection.

Granted, the working class (again, defined as noncollege) represents a shrinking portion of the electorate. Three decades ago, according to Pew, 76 percent of all registered voters were noncollege; today it's more like 63 percent. But that's still nearly two-thirds of all voters. As Democrats lose working-class voters, they're picking up a larger share of college-grad voters repelled by the GOP's thuggish turn under Donald Trump. But electoral math compels the Democrats to pick up two college graduates for every noncollege voter who leaves. Given some slackening in college enrollment during the previous decade and demographic projections of an "enrollment cliff" in the next, that calculus likely won't change anytime soon.

The electoral math gets even worse when you consider this year's battleground states. Battleground swing voters will likely determine who becomes president (not to mention whether the Senate remains Democratic), and they skew more heavily toward noncollege voters (72 percent) than the nation as a whole (63 percent). Democrats in those crucial states, according to Jared Abbott and Fred DeVeaux of the Center for Working-Class Politics, will need to pick up not two but *three* college grads for every noncollege voter they lose. Rather than obsess about further expanding its share of college voters, the party would do better to think hard about how it can shore up a working-class constituency that, even at this late date, remains essential to winning the White House.

The Democrats' leakage of working-class voters has inspired much griping in recent years about the party's half-century of gentrification and its presidential candidates' tin-eared gaffes about deplorables, guns, and religion. We've heard much less about practical solutions to rebuild the Democrats' working-class support. If liberals, as the sociologist Matthew Desmond has written, are "fluent in the language of grievance and bumbling in the language of repair," I've set out to find at least a few political professionals who are working to fix this problem. They have, it turns out, some plausible, concrete ideas about how to revive the Democrats' working-class support—or, at the very least, to stanch the bleeding. I've collected what strike me as their best ideas here.

Don't Despair!

MANY POLITICAL OBSERVERS view Trump's political realignment of the working class into the GOP base as irreversible—"largely baked," in the words of *The New York Times*' Nate Cohn. But, as noted above, Biden has accumulated an unusually strong record on issues that mattered to working-class voters in the past, and this cohort has never voted so predictably as many suppose.

You hear a lot about how reliably Democratic the working class was through the mid–twentieth century. But that overlooks the 1950s. The New Deal coalition was in full flower, and organized labor's power stood at its historic peak. Yet Republicans won House and Senate majorities in 1946 and 1952 and the presidency in 1952 and 1956. You can argue that Eisenhower was a special case—a war hero courted by both parties. But the margins by which Adlai Stevenson lost noncollege voters—14 percentage points in 1952, nearly 18 points in 1956—exceeded the margins by which Stevenson lost the overall popular vote. That was because Stevenson had no clue how to connect to working-class voters.

John F. Kennedy coaxed the working class back into the Democratic fold in 1960, but only barely, with a 50.4 percent majority of the noncollege vote; by a comparably slender margin Kennedy lost the white noncollege vote (probably due to anti-Catholic prejudice). In 1964, Lyndon Johnson, who revered Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal (and carried the mantle of the martyred Kennedy), expanded the Democrats' noncollege majority to nearly 70 percent, a proportion never matched since by either party. Then, legend has it, Johnson threw it away by signing civil rights legislation into law.

The truth is a little more complicated. Yes, the Republican share of the (then still overwhelmingly white) noncollege vote skyrocketed after 1964, peaking at 65 percent in 1972, when the Democrats ran George McGovern. But Watergate reversed that gain, and for the next half-century, the working class, which remained majority-white but grew less so over time, stayed in play. Bill Clinton won *white* noncollege voters in 1992 and 1996—the core demographic sent packing by LBJ—and Jimmy Carter nearly did in 1976.

Granted, as John Judis and Ruy Teixeira document in their 2023 book, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*, Democratic slippage among working-class voters worsened during the past decade. According to Gallup, the proportion of Black and Latino voters willing to identify themselves as Democrats or Democratic leaners fell during the past 10 years from 70 percent to 47 percent for Blacks, and from 24 percent to 12 percent for Latinos. This is very bad news, but it needs to be considered in context. Party identification has been declining for *both* Republicans and Democrats in recent years; each now claims 27 percent of voters, and the proportion claiming to be independent has ballooned to 43 percent. Disaffection with the Democratic Party doesn't mean a working-class voter won't pull the lever for a Democrat. It just means that working-class voters will need a lot more persuading than in the past.

Over the past century, no Democrat—with one exception—has ever won the presidency without winning a majority of working-class voters. The single exception was Joe Biden in 2020; Biden lost noncollege voters that year to President Donald Trump, 47 percent to 51 percent.

Shut Up and Listen

NEARLY EVERY EXPERT I interviewed for this article said some version of the following: If Democrats want to win back the working class, they have to go out and ask working-class people what they need. (Odds are they'll be met with skepticism about whether government in general, and Democrats in particular, can supply it.) Listening is a slow and exhausting process, largely conducted door to door, and it won't yield much of a tangible electoral benefit in 2024. The good news is that this work is already underway at the local level by groups with names like TakeAction Minnesota, Isaiah (also in Minnesota), We the People Michigan, Living United for Change in Arizona, Down Home North Carolina, Carolina Federation (also in North Carolina), Florida Rising, the New Georgia Project, and the Southern Economic Advancement Project.

Stacey Abrams, the charismatic former Democratic leader of the Georgia House of Representatives, is the founder of the New Georgia Project, the Southern Economic Advancement Project, and various similar groups. She plays a Johnny Appleseed role inviting ordinary citizens to demand democratic accountability that's comparable to the role Ralph Nader assumed in the 1960s. Abrams's calling cards are Biden's Georgia victory in 2020 and the two Georgia Senate victories that put Democrats in the majority. But that's a by-product of her efforts, not the goal. "I create, fund, and support organizations that put forward year-round engagement," Abrams explained to me. "When we reduce people just to voters, we lose them."

Most such groups work within a given state or region, but Working America, which was founded in 2003 by Karen Nussbaum and is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, operates nationally. It has more than four million members (dues are optional).

Canvassers travel door to door engaging with residents who are neither strong Democrats nor strong Republicans. "We are organizers, and that is different than being a communicator in the political space," Matt Morrison, Working America's executive director, explained to me. "Every conversation starts with, 'What issue is most important to you and your family?'" The term of art for this activity is "deep canvassing." Nussbaum told me she'd talked recently to a Black woman who went eight days without heat during a cold spell and to a Latino man who was evicted and had to move further away from his place of work. "Rent has emerged as an enormous issue," she said. Some of this deep canvassing gets compiled into research reports—what Working America calls Front Porch Focus Groups—and some becomes an opportunity for Working America to acquaint voters with where politicians at the local and national level stand on issues related to their concerns. This year, the organization is deploying canvassers in four battleground states—Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona, and

Wisconsin—targeting 25 million people Working America has identified as "persuadable."

"We measure everything," Morrison told me, including Working America's own effectiveness. In the 2022 midterms, according to Morrison, Working America "generated an additional 407,015 Democratic voters," and in the Arizona governor's race and the Georgia and Nevada Senate races, it "generated more votes than the margin of victory for the Democratic candidate." A series of studies co-written by Yale's Joshua L. Kalla and Berkeley's David E. Broockman demonstrated the benefits of deep canvassing. The first, published in 2016, showed that it shifted views of as many as 10 percent of those canvassed to a more sympathetic position on culture-war issues like transgender rights and immigration. Perhaps more tellingly, a later study, published in 2022, showed that it helped canvassers reduce their own "affective polarization."

Forget Fox News

YES, I KNOW, FOX NEWS IS VERY BAD, and it seems like it's everywhere. Tim Ryan, former Democratic representative from Ohio, who lost a Senate bid in 2022, told me that when he was campaigning that year in Cleveland, he was shocked to see it playing in a Black barbershop. When working-class people watch cable news, it's usually going to be Fox.

But not that many people watch cable news. According to Nielsen, only about 12 percent of the population tunes into Fox News in any given month. The Fox audience skews only slightly toward the working-class Fox purports to serve. Reviewing cable news demographics in 2020, Christopher R. Martin of the University of Northern Iowa found that 16.9 percent of Fox viewers earned in the $50,000 to $75,000 range—only a sliver more than the 16.5 percent of CNN viewers and the 16.4 percent of MSNBC viewers. A much larger proportion of Fox viewers—44.9 percent—earn less than $50,000, but that, too, is roughly comparable to CNN (40.9 percent) and MSNBC (39 percent). The demographic that defines Fox News (and all cable news) isn't economic, but generational: Fox's median viewer is 68 years old.

Do too many people watch Fox News? Of course. But the bigger problem is this: *Most people don't watch (or read) any news at all.* Fully 80 to 85 percent of Americans pay little or no attention to the news, the political scientists Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan, both of the University of Michigan, reported in 2020. That indifference is more widespread among the working class; in their 2022 book, *The Other Divide: Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics*, Krupnikov and Ryan found that there is something particular to the liberal arts environment that increases political engagement, especially at more affluent private colleges.

The good news is that the 80 to 85 percent who don't follow the news tend not to be hyper-partisan, so you can stop blaming that poisonous turn on the proletariat. "These are smart, thoughtful people who simply want to be able to take care of themselves and their families," said Stacey Abrams. The bad news is that these voters will be the last to hear that (as the business press is *finally* reporting) the economy is in much better health than it was when Biden took office. The difficult challenge remains in how to reach working-class voters at the grassroots. But once Democrats find them, these voters' resistance to persuasion won't be as great as many imagine.

Forget the Brahmin Left

JUDIS AND TEIXEIRA HAVE DRAWN much criticism (including in this magazine) for advising Democratic candidates to distance themselves from "woke" provocation espoused by what the economist Thomas Piketty calls the "Brahmin Left." But just about every person I interviewed for this article said much the same. In 2021, the Center for Working-Class Politics surveyed 2,000 working-class voters in five swing states and concluded that "'woke,' activist-inspired rhetoric is a liability." This survey was co-sponsored by *Jacobin*, a radical-left magazine that runs articles with headlines like "HOW TRANSPHOBIC MORAL PANICS FUEL AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS" and "WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KYLE RITTENHOUSE AND THE POLICE?" In effect, the Center for Working-Class Politics' finding, published in a report ("COMMONSENSE SOLIDARITY") that's posted on *Jacobin's* own website, consists of *Jacobin* telling Democratic candidates not to talk like *Jacobin*—at least on these issues.

Survey participants were invited to choose between Candidate A and Candidate B, each of whom was given a sound bite; the woke-progressive candidate was furnished with one of several real sound bites from Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Representative Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts. The survey found white working-class voters averse to Brahmin Left rhetoric and Latino working-class voters even more averse. Black working-class voters showed neither an aversion nor a preference. But in general, candidates who expressed themselves "in highly specialized, identity-focused language" fared poorly.

The Center for Working-Class Politics survey probed Brahmin Left rhetoric; a survey of working-class voters, weighted toward battleground states and conducted last October and November by the centrist Progressive Policy Institute (also in collaboration with YouGov), probed Brahmin Left issues, and found them to be unpopular. On gender reassignment, 48 percent said hormone replacement therapy should be available only to adults, and 27 percent said it should be available to children under 18. Another 24 percent said it should be available to nobody. On defunding the police, 27 percent favored it, against 31 percent who favored spending more on police and prisons, and 42 percent who favored the middle position of giving police better surveillance technology and supporting first-responder alternatives like mental health crisis experts.

The failure of Ron DeSantis's primary bid suggests the Republican culture war against woke-ism has little appeal even to Republicans. But that doesn't translate into political support *for* Brahmin Left rhetoric or positions. More likely, voters don't want these matters brought into the political realm at all, because they're divisive and lie outside their experience. For that reason, Democratic candidates tend already to avoid engaging these issues. That's a sound instinct for the foreseeable future.

Tax and Spend and Support Labor

DEMOCRATIC POLITICIANS MAY BE WISE when they distance themselves from the Brahmin Left, but they're foolish when they distance themselves from the Economic Left. The two principal findings of the 2021 survey by the Center for Working-Class Politics

were that working-class voters most favored candidates who focused on kitchen table issues like jobs and the cost of health care, and that "populist, class-based progressive" sound bites—think Bernie Sanders—worked best. Significantly, "progressive populist messaging performed equally well among independents as Republican messaging, while all other Democratic messaging styles performed worse." To paraphrase Barry Goldwater: Economic moderation in pursuit of working-class voters is no virtue.

The Progressive Policy Institute study asked working-class voters whether inequality was the result of individual "differences in talent and drive" or the economy being "controlled by the rich and powerful." Fully 65 percent blamed the plutocrats, versus only 35 percent who blamed lack of talent and motivation. Asked whether corporations create more good than harm, half said they caused more harm—not exactly a vote of confidence in the free market. A question about Biden's "COVID relief, support for state and local governments, stimulus checks, infrastructure, and clean-energy investment"—mostly the same infrastructure bill, IRA, and CHIPS Act that Democratic midterm candidates were reluctant to talk about in 2022—showed these were supported by 46 percent and opposed by 47 percent, but the deficit-hawkish Progressive Policy Institute loaded the question by referring to the programs as "deficit-financed spending." Without the dig, a clear majority would surely have expressed support.

A nonprofit called Patriotic Millionaires has been hosting sessions in Wisconsin and North Carolina aimed at persuading working-class voters to support higher taxes on the rich. That shouldn't be difficult, because polls consistently show that a majority of Americans favor higher taxes on the rich. An April 2023 Pew Research Center poll found that 65 percent of Americans favored higher taxes on corporations, and among middle-income people (a rough proxy for the working class), it was a slightly higher 67 percent. Even among Republicans and Republican leaners, higher corporate taxes were favored by 45 percent of the middle-income cohort. Yet in 2021, when Biden proposed hiking corporate taxes from 21 percent to a mere 28 percent—as recently as 2017, the top rate was 35 percent—House Democrats knocked that down to 26.5 percent, and then Senate Democrat Joe Manchin killed it. Another Biden proposal to tax the rich—elimination of the "angel of death" loophole that exempts inheritances from the capital gains tax—never made it out of committee. Congressional Democrats need to catch up with working-class voters' leftward drift on these issues.

Perhaps you're wondering whether the Democratic political class's skittishness about tax increases reflects a zero-sum political calculation: Win working-class voters with redistributive economics, and you'll lose suburban professionals. If that's the thinking, the numbers suggest it's dead wrong. The Pew Research Center poll showed that even upper-income voters favored higher taxes on corporations, by a 62 percent majority. Those same upper-income voters favored raising taxes on household incomes above $400,000 by a 56 percent majority (compared to a 63 percent majority among middle-income voters). In a December paper, a team of political scientists led by Yale's Jacob Hacker noted that Biden's leftward policy shift on economic issues does not seem to be costing the Democrats votes from their affluent new suburban constituency.

Democratic politicians know that voters across the board have moved left on economic issues. What really inhibits them isn't the suburban *haute bourgeoisie* but rich donors. Organized labor is the issue with the greatest tension between what voters want and what political contributors want. The popularity of unions is higher today than at any time since the 1960s. Yet, most Democratic politicians treat labor unions like an embarrassing uncle who tells fart jokes at Thanksgiving. The reason is that Uncle Solidarity irritates Uncle Moneybags.

In 2009, Obama possessed the Senate votes to pass a bill enabling workplaces to organize more easily through the informal collection of union authorization cards, as occurred routinely before Congress passed the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Obama had voted for the bill himself as a senator. The bill's prospects in the Democratic House were less certain, but had Obama put the administration's weight behind "card check," there's a fair chance he could have gotten it. He was persuaded not to, Judis and Teixeira write in *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*, at the urging of "three Chicago billionaires": Penny Pritzker, Obama's campaign finance chair; Lester Crown, an industrialist and financier; and Neil Bluhm, a real estate tycoon. By doing so, they conclude, Obama "forfeited any chance to alter the Democrats' increasingly narrow governing coalition and to create a genuine counterweight to the influence of business and Wall Street."

Obama didn't fully grasp how thoroughly Democrats have relied in the past on strong labor unions to keep working-class people voting Democratic. Union households are the only non-ethnic subgroups of working-class voters that have remained consistently Democratic through labor's long decline. But every year there are fewer of them, and an NBC News poll found that Biden's advantage over Trump among union households fell from 56–40 in the 2020 exit polls to 50–41 at the beginning of this year. That's shocking for a president as conspicuously pro-labor as Biden. Other Democrats need to get the message out that President Biden's National Labor Relations Board has been expanding labor rights at least as vigorously as President Trump moved to restrict them. That matters to working-class voters. A Working America survey in 2020 asked "persuadable" voters in five battleground states whether the government should make it easier to join a union. A 59 percent majority agreed. When Biden walked a picket line during the UAW strike, Trump conspicuously gave a speech at a nonunion plant. Democrats mustn't let voters forget that.

Talk Insulin

THE QUESTION REMAINS how Democrats can persuade working-class voters that Biden's leftward shift in economic policy, way off in distant Washington, benefits them. The infrastructure bill, the IRA, and the CHIPS Act have spurred $220 billion in manufacturing construction, and it's important for Democrats to highlight that. But it will be a while before those plants are up and running and creating manufacturing jobs. Better to start the pitch with something Biden has delivered already: affordable insulin.

"That $35 insulin that your mom is getting now?" Mike Lux, president of American Family Voices, advises Democrats to say. "Joe Biden did that." A $35 price cap on insulin for Medicare patients took effect in January 2023. It's one of the few items in the misnamed Inflation Reduction Act that actually addressed inflation. Steve Rosenthal, a former political director of the

If liberals are "fluent in the language of grievance and bumbling in the language of repair," I've set out to find at least a few political professionals who are working to fix this problem. They have, it turns out, some plausible, concrete ideas about how to revive the Democrats' working-class support.

AFL-CIO who now runs a deep-canvassing project called the Winning Jobs Narrative, told me that when he conducted focus groups last November in Michigan and Pennsylvania, people "had no idea Biden had anything to do with it." A Kaiser Family Foundation survey last July found that even among the target beneficiaries—Medicare-eligible adults age 65 and older—a 56 percent majority were unaware the cap even existed.

When I asked Working America's Morrison how Democrats can improve outreach to working-class voters, insulin was the first thing he mentioned: "Start with every Medicare beneficiary in every community that you can geo-indicate as having disproportionate levels of diabetes and push like crazy the $35 price cap." The insulin cap is a good example of something Biden did that Trump merely pretended to do. During the last year of his presidency, Trump created a voluntary program inviting Medicare drug-prescription plans, which are privately managed, to cap insulin prices at $35 in exchange for a premium hike. Trump then boasted at a presidential debate that he'd made insulin "so cheap, it's like water." In fact, insulin was retailing at the time for $300. Biden, by contrast, imposed a mandatory price ceiling under Medicare that does not permit a compensating premium hike. *No Medicare enrollee pays more than $35 for insulin.* Last year, Biden proposed extending that same price ceiling for insulin to all private health care plans, regardless of the patient's age.

Be Working Class

A WORKING-CLASS MESSAGE IS GOOD. A working-class candidate is better. "Commonsense Solidarity," the Center for Working-Class Politics' 2021 survey of 2,000 working-class voters in five swing states, found that the race and gender of its hypothetical candidates didn't matter much to working-class voters,

> but candidates with upper-class backgrounds performed significantly less well than other candidates.... In our sample, corporate executives were seen as the least favorable by far, with lawyers the second-least favorable. Teachers, veterans, small business owners, and construction workers were more or less equally popular.

Judis invited me to consider the divergent fates of Jeff Ettinger and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez, two Democratic nominees in rural districts in the 2022 midterms.

Ettinger was a former chief executive of Hormel Foods, running in Minnesota's First Congressional District, the site of a bitter strike at Hormel's Austin plant that cost 80 percent of the strikers their jobs. The strike had occurred four decades earlier, before Ettinger worked at the company, but memories were long, and Ettinger lost by 12 points to Republican Brad Finstad, a farmer and former rural development director for the Agriculture Department in Minnesota.

Gluesenkamp Perez's story was quite different. A 34-year-old auto body shop owner, she campaigned in Washington state's rural Third District in her work clothes and talked up "right to repair," or the removal of barriers certain manufacturers impose to prevent consumers from being able to repair cell phones, farm equipment, and various other products. Gluesenkamp Perez won a narrow victory, 50–49, against Joe Kent, a hard-right Trump ally.

Clearly the Democrats need to run more Gluesenkamp Perezes and fewer Ettingers. But they do just the opposite. In his 2018 book, *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office—and What We Can Do About It*, Nicholas Carnes, a political scientist at Duke, reports that working-class politicians, defined as politicians who held blue-collar jobs immediately before entering politics, pretty consistently occupied only about 2 percent of the seats in Congress between 1961 and 2011. During roughly the same period, state legislatures saw their proportion of working-class politicians fall from 5 percent to 3 percent. Of course, being working-class is no guarantee that you'll support the economic left. But according to Carnes, working-class politicians in both the Democratic and the Republican parties are "more likely than their fellow partisans to take progressive or pro-worker positions on major economic issues."

Running more working-class candidates for political office would reinforce something that Art Reyes, executive director of We the People Michigan, told me. We the People, he said, is "rooted in a deep belief that the only way our communities are going to have dignity is by building multiracial, working-class power." In 2022, a We the People organizer named Betsy Coffia, who grew up working-class and had worked as a social worker in Michigan's Head Start program, ran for Michigan's state House of Representatives. The working-class communities that We the People Michigan helped organized canvassed for her, and she won, flipping the House to Democratic control and giving Democrats their first "trifecta"—control of both houses of the legislature and the governorship—in four decades.

"You often see a pretty paternalistic narrative" from the Democrats," Reyes told me, in which politicians tell voters how they're going to help them. "It's very different when a community is organized around their self-interest." When working people help themselves, they help Democrats, too. TNR

Timothy Noah *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

25 Political Influencers To Watch As the Election Nears

A GUIDE TO SOME OF TODAY'S MOST NOTEWORTHY POLITICAL VOICES ONLINE

Photographs by Greg Kahn

Annie Wu Henry

The White House Correspondents' Dinner, that lavish, storied fundraiser held every April at the Washington Hilton to honor journalists covering the capital, confers on its deep-pocketed attendees the implicit assurance that they belong among the powerful. Buy a ticket, and between your terrine of jumbo lump crabmeat and your foraged wild mushroom ragout you will have the chance to chat with someone of superlative influence: if not a lawmaker, then a reporter granted coveted access; if not a reporter, then a celebrity; if not a celebrity, then a well-heeled media financier. Excluding Donald Trump, every president since Calvin Coolidge has attended the event.

Meanwhile, with a few notable exceptions, the newspapers, magazines, and TV networks where these reporters work are inexorably shrinking, disappearing. Mass layoffs, buyouts, closures—the legacy institutions trample their own inheritance; the startups stutter and stop. Social platforms tug at our scarce attention. "IS THE MEDIA PREPARED FOR AN EXTINCTION-LEVEL EVENT?" asked one recent headline. There's much to worry about in this unsettling new journalistic landscape, and the future of democracy sometimes feels like the least of it.

Of course, it's hardly news that traditional media has in many ways been superseded by social media, even as the platforms themselves rapidly morph—Twitter's sad devolution into the chaotic world of X and TikTok's uncertain future in the United States offering cases in point. There are many excellent reasons to mourn this development, but a few aspects, we insist, are worth celebrating, particularly the famous leveling of the playing field, where, in theory, anyone has access to anyone. In the spirit of celebration, *The New Republic* sought to identify an alternative set of political influencers: 25 people shaping our national conversations whom you'd be less likely to find at the Hilton in April (though we're not, to be clear, ruling out their appearance).

The term "influencer" is more typically applied to lifestyle gurus hawking subscription smoothies, and some of the people on our list—who care passionately about trans rights, abortion rights, the Supreme Court, the war in Gaza, police brutality, and criminal justice reform, to name just a few of their preoccupations—might balk at the description. But the members of this stylistically and ideologically heterogeneous bunch are all trying to influence us, in the best sense of the word—to engage us, change our minds, compel us to act. They are activists, lawyers, historians, comedians, media critics, journalists, and, yes, a few politicians. If their medium is unapologetically contemporary, they display a commitment to old-fashioned principles: that communication breeds community, that educating the public is not in vain, and that it would be dangerous, especially in an election year of staggering consequence, to leave politics to those walking the halls of power.

Rhiannon Hamam, Michael Liroff, and Peter Shamshiri

Reeling from the Supreme Court conservative supermajority's gutting of many long-cherished rights, thousands of listeners have turned to *5–4*, a podcast founded in 2020 by three lawyers: Rhiannon Hamam, Michael Liroff, and Peter Shamshiri. The show is an irreverent and sometimes vulgar exploration into, as its tagline puts it, "how much the Supreme Court sucks." Episodes cover individual SCOTUS decisions, from the most infamous to the lesser-known-but-equally consequential, as well as explore the seamy underbelly of American legal education and culture. "The media tends to talk about the law and the courts as if they exist outside of politics and ideology," said Shamshiri, who was publicly known only as "Peter" until late 2022, when his employer, a major insurance company, found out about the show and promptly fired him. "We want to make the case that you can only really understand the Supreme Court as a political institution that crafts policy without real democratic input."

Kat Abughazaleh

Media Matters for America, a progressive research and information center devoted to correcting conservative misinformation in media, has been plying its trade since the dawn of digital journalism, but there's never been anyone on staff quite like Kat Abughazaleh, who "watches Fox News for a living," as she puts it, and was seemingly born to conquer the video realm—her standout work on YouTube and TikTok (**@katmabu** on those platforms and **@abughazalehkat** on X) has earned her a legion of fans. Abughazaleh's work exemplifies a key lesson that so many others who have attempted the fabled pivot-to-video forgot to learn: You can't just point a camera at something and call it a day. Video isn't done, it's made; the two key ingredients being whip-smart writing and editing. Whether Abughazaleh is laying waste to right-wing talking points, explaining the latest culture-war obsession in conservative circles, or tormenting Tucker Carlson, her work brims with wit that's more Edgar Wright than Beltway wonk.


Kat Abughazaleh

"In such a chaotic media ecosystem, many bad actors are counting on people to feel overwhelmed," Abughazaleh told *The New Republic*. "I hope that my videos help counteract what right-wing media are pushing."

Imani Barbarin

There are more than 42 million Americans with disabilities today—but still they're often left out of our conversations about politics. Imani Barbarin takes issue with that. The disability rights activist, who posts as **@crutches_and_spice**, is trying to change how we talk about bodily autonomy. If she uses her platform to share her own experiences with cerebral palsy, she also zooms out to the bigger picture, discussing disability, ableism, racism, and, more generally, what it means to take care of your mental, physical, and spiritual health in 2024. She reminds people that Covid still exists, she advocates for reproductive rights, and she's never afraid to call out those on the left when they deserve it. She has been a vocal critic of the Biden administration and its support for Israel's atrocities in Gaza, which she has called a "mass disabling event."

Averie Bishop

Averie Bishop is used to being first: the first in her family to complete a four-year college degree; the first Asian American to win Miss Texas, in 2022; and, if she wins her race for the seat in Texas's House District 112, northeast of Dallas, the first Filipino American to serve in the state House. Bishop, whose handle is **@averiebishop**, downloaded TikTok on a whim around 2019 to chronicle her life as a first-year law student at Southern Methodist University. ("I've been on Insta since like seventh grade.") Her Miss Texas tenure took a high-profile political turn with the *Dobbs* decision, when she began posting pro-choice videos. And when Bishop announced her candidacy last August, her robust social media campaign likely helped deter potential Democratic primary opponents from entering the ring. Her videos range from day-in-the-life snippets to conversations with voters about how to fill out a primary ballot and where to research candidates. Bishop herself is quick to point out that her considerable following "doesn't exactly convert to monetization." Raising money, she lamented, is "a pain point for a young woman of color." She'll face an uphill battle against incumbent Angie Chen Button (the district was recently redrawn redder) as she beats the drum for diversity and inclusion policies—which were recently outlawed in the state's higher education system.

A.B. Burns-Tucker

A.B. Burns-Tucker, a graduate of Southwestern Law School who goes by **@iamlegallyhype** on social media, attracted her sizable TikTok following by making irreverent, lively explainer clips about complex legal and political issues in the news. Burns-Tucker started posting videos in 2020, as a way of drawing attention to the plight of her younger brother, Brandon Parks-Burns, who was sentenced to 50 years to life in prison for a murder that happened when he was 15 (he maintains his innocence). Today, Burns-Tucker is a board member of California Innocence Advocates and hosts a weekly segment, "Believe the Hype," on the nationally syndicated radio show *The Morning Hustle*. She seeks to make current affairs intelligible to an audience historically ignored by the media. "I figured I could put the information out there in a way that people will understand, enjoy, and be able to interpret," she told the Black News Channel in February 2022. As she suggested to CNN's Van Jones in 2022, politicians ignore young people in particular at their peril; the younger generations are "bolder" and "ready to go toe to toe" on issues they feel passionate about.

Brittany Packnett Cunningham

Representative Maxwell Frost

Brittany Packnett Cunningham

Brittany Packnett Cunningham is perhaps best known for her unflagging criticism of police brutality. As an appointee of President Barack Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, as a member of the Ferguson Commission, and as a key participant in the 2014 Ferguson protests themselves, Cunningham has helped broadcast the urgent need for police reform in the United States to a mass audience. But her political activity is not limited to any one domain: The activist, who posts as **@MsPackyetti**, has spoken out against gun violence, the suppression of Black history in public schools, and Israel's assault on Gaza. "I really try to use my platforms to build the context that is missing from so many of our societal conversations, to help people understand the connective tissue"—namely "systems, institutions," she told TNR. "Institutions were created, and they can be re-created."

Courtney Dorritie

Courtney Dorritie is TikTok's "Narcan fairy." Her account is a veritable clearinghouse for important harm reduction strategies and advocacy: tutorials showing how to prevent an overdose with the nasal spray with which she's become associated, Good Samaritan Law explainers, and vlogs that chronicle her days as a specialist at a harm reduction center in the Bronx. She dispels myths about addiction in one video, and poses for fit pics, complete with her signature dangling Narcan pouch necklace, in another. Dorritie, whose handle is **@courtOoO**, also documents her life as a former drug user and unhoused person, offering advice for navigating the shelter system and turning her comment section into a celebratory space for followers to share their own stories. Dorritie's feed is as informative as it is compassionate, a digital social support system and training center. As homeless services are defunded in New York City and remain underfunded across the country, her work is more critical than ever.

Carlos Eduardo Espina

Carlos Eduardo Espina (**@carlos_eduardo_espina** on Instagram and TikTok) immigrated to Texas from Uruguay when he was five years old. Like many of the state's residents who weren't born there but "got there as fast as they could," as Texans like to say, Espina has worked from a young age to make his adopted home a better place. Best known today for his Spanish-language politics coverage on TikTok and Instagram—including explainers on whatever draconian immigration law Republicans like Governor Greg Abbott and company have cooked up—Espina, a law student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, started his own nonprofit when he was just 17. He was motivated by seeing how much his hometown college, Texas A&M University in College Station, charged for a three-day soccer camp: around $400. "I

The Good Liars

> "I really try to use my platforms to build the context that is missing from so many of our societal conversations, to help people understand the connective tissue… systems, institutions. Institutions were created, and they can be re-created."
>
> —BRITTANY PACKNETT CUNNINGHAM

was like, 'No one can really afford that!'" he told TNR. He and his soccer-playing friends decided to offer a free camp for local kids. In the video pinned to the top of his TikTok profile, Espina describes how much money he made with his social media presence in 2023: more than $1.2 million. Half of that revenue he put toward constructing a 15-acre community center north of Houston, including soccer fields. "It's been my dream for many years now," he said. "Thanks to social media, we'll be able to achieve it a lot sooner than expected."

Representative Maxwell Frost

"I have a lot of hope for the future of the country," Maxwell Frost, who represents Florida's 10th Congressional District, told TNR. "I know it feels a little weird to say that now, the way things are. But I do. I do have a lot of hope." The first Gen Z member of Congress and a former national organizing director for March for Our Lives, Frost still thinks like an activist. It's yielded results: The 27-year-old Orlando-area native, who posts as **@MaxwellFrostFL**, has already used his influence to help create the first federal office focused on gun violence. He is focused on issues that are important to young people—climate change, immigration reform, ending gun violence—and his hope for the future is rooted in what he calls "the most politically active generation in this country's history." Despite a historically unproductive Republican-run Congress, Frost has found success by channeling his experience as an organizer. "As younger people, organizers, working people get up and run for office," he said, he believes change will come. "That's what gives me hope: The people are on our side in terms of the issues."

Imani Gandy

"Abortion is still healthcare, motherfuckers": This was the tweet pinned to the top of Imani Gandy's X profile for the better part of March. Levying her ire at the right's onslaught against reproductive rights, this legal expert and editor at large for Rewire News Group has, by her own description, "zero chill." She joined Twitter in 2009 and began making a concerted effort to accrue a following a couple of years later. After Elon Musk's takeover of the social platform, she wasn't sure she'd stick with it: "I actually quit Twitter for a whole seven days at the beginning of this year," she told TNR. "But I really think that in this age of misinformation and the way the platform is being run, it's important for the 'old hands' to step up." From her perch as co-host of the podcast *Boom! Lawyered*, Gandy (**@AngryBlackLady**) has debunked the junk science attacking medication abortions, punctured the "Lawyers for Fetuses" movement, and taken Constitution "originalists" to task for wanting to arm domestic abusers. "I mostly go where the abortion winds blow," she said. She was also a fairly early adopter—among political streamers at least—of the gaming platform Twitch, streaming "Let's Play" series and chatting with folks while she played *Witcher 3*, *The Last of Us*, and *SnowRunner*, an off-road driving simulation game.

The Good Liars

Jason Selvig and Davram Stiefler, the comedy duo known as The Good Liars, are best known for conducting prank interviews as a means of exposing the

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>
> —PETER SHAMSHIRI, *5–4*

hypocrisy and ignorance of many on the right. In their inaugural stunt, during Occupy Wall Street, they posed as investors protesting the demonstrations. Five years later, in 2016, they released the election comedy *Undecided: The Movie*, in which they pranked the presidential candidates. More recently, they've filmed interviews at the March for Life, at NRA conventions, and at Donald Trump rallies. They also launched a podcast, *The Good Liars Tell the Truth*, on which they explore the news with guests from the worlds of both comedy and politics. It can be maddening, even "nauseating," to follow the train accident that is politics these days, Stiefler observed in a conversation with TNR. "People reach out to us and say that they would not have been able to keep paying attention, that the only way to stomach politics is through humor." In fact, he said, some of their viewers have confessed to not watching straight news at all anymore, and only keep up with The Good Liars' videos. So if the duo didn't start out with the aim of helping to maintain an exhausted, queasy citizenry's connection to politics, they now embrace the mission. "We either have something extra in our brains or something missing from our brains that allows us to … do this," Stiefler said. "But we have enjoyed it."

Mehdi Hasan

Mehdi Hasan, a prominent British American journalist known for his incisive commentary and fearless questioning of his interviewees, has worked for Al Jazeera, The Intercept, and the Huffington Post UK; currently, he writes a column for *The Guardian*. His work often focuses on issues of social justice, foreign policy, and politics. *The Mehdi Hasan Show* began on Peacock in October 2020 and was hosted on MSNBC from March 2021 to January 2024. Hasan, who is Muslim, frequently critiqued Israel's war on Gaza, and late last year the network announced it was canceling his show, a move that drew fierce backlash. An anonymous source close to the situation at MSNBC told *The Washington Post* the decision was unrelated to his commentary about Israel and instead the result of a "broader restructuring" of the network's weekend lineup. In February, Hasan (**@mehdirhasan** on social platforms) announced he was starting a digital media company, Zeteo. He had launched the venture, he explained to CNN's Jake Tapper, because he wanted to "be able to speak in a blunter fashion" than most people in media do, and offer a platform for others to do the same. "My purpose as a journalist—and in life?—is to make people in power uncomfortable," he told TNR. "Everything else is noise."

Annie Wu Henry

In 2022, if you enjoyed any of now-Senator John Fetterman's viral TikTok posts, you can thank Annie Wu Henry. The Gen Z digital maven was the social media producer on the Pennsylvania lawmaker's campaign and ran his TikTok account. Henry—known as **@Annie_Wu_22** on social media—has also worked with Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Working Families Party, and Helen Gym, who lost in the 2023 Democratic primary for mayor of Philadelphia. Henry believes in the importance of using social media to connect with young progressive voters in particular. "I think, on their own, younger people on the left have harnessed the power of mobilizing online where the right has not," she told TNR. In 2024, as President Joe Biden tries to connect with young voters, that insight into how Gen Z voters operate will be more salient than ever.

David Hogg

Six years ago, David Hogg survived the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. Since then, he has become a leading activist for gun control and youth empowerment. Hogg co-founded March for Our Lives, a movement advocating for stricter gun laws, which flooded the nation's capital with hundreds of thousands of protesters the month after the Parkland massacre. He has been a vocal advocate for political change, using his platform to push for legislative action on gun violence prevention. The 24-year-old (**@davidhogg111** on X) recently graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree in history and co-founded the Leaders We Deserve PAC, which is committed to helping elect young people to Congress and state legislatures. On social media, he engages with his audience on pressing issues and encourages civic participation. His aim, he explained to TNR, is to demonstrate to young people that our political system is not so broken that it's unfixable. "There's nothing more rewarding than showing other young survivors that they're not alone," he said. "And that we're not powerless."

Olivia Julianna

Nobody speaks to Generation Z quite like Olivia Julianna. The 21-year-old Houston native, who posts as **@0liviajulianna**, began using TikTok to get political news in 2020; for her, like many Americans, that summer's racial justice protests were politically formative. Today, Julianna's videos range from in-depth explainers on the right's assaults on reproductive rights and democracy to advice for young organizers. A queer, disabled, fourth-generation Mexican American, she is a spirited guide to the political moment; her posts mock Republican hypocrisy, alert followers about upcoming elections and ballot measures, and celebrate hard-won Democratic victories. And she's masterfully co-opted

Mehdi Hasan

Alec Karakatsanis

the right's political lexicon of trolling; when Florida Representative Matt Gaetz body-shamed her on X, Julianna responded by raising more than $2 million for abortion access. If TikTok is not only where young Americans go to kill time but where they get their news, Julianna is making Democratic politics and progressive causes accessible for the next generation of voters and leaders.

Mariame Kaba

The career of abolitionist organizer and author Mariame Kaba long predates social media. She has written numerous books—including *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* and *Let This Radicalize You*—and has a preternatural knack for distilling her diverse work into memorable language. Over the decade-plus she's been an active presence on social platforms, her refrains that "hope is a discipline" and "prison is not feminist" have become movement aphorisms that travel far from movement spaces. But Kaba, who posts as **@prisonculture**, is also able to move people to act: She has raised thousands of dollars for abortion funds and bail funds and documented her co-creation of a mutual aid project housed at the New York bookstore Bluestockings. Recently, she organized For the People, a leftist project in response to the attacks on public libraries, countering book bans and the conservative takeovers of library boards by helping to educate and support people who want a seat on boards governing their own community libraries. She saw Twitter as a way to "uplift local organizing, share resources, and raise funds," but recently stopped posting—a move that was "a long time coming," she told TNR—and joined the Twitter alternative Bluesky. A year ago, she started a Substack newsletter, Prisons, Prose, and Protest. "All of these platforms are fraught," she said, "so we'll see."

Alec Karakatsanis

Civil rights lawyer Alec Karakatsanis (**@equalityAlec** on X) notes that most tweets and Instagram posts assume that people "know way too much about an issue." Among many high-profile victories, he won *O'Donnell v. Harris County*—which resulted in a 2019 consent decree ordering Harris County, Texas, to limit bail requirements for nonviolent offenders. Around the same time, Karakatsanis started tweeting distinctive threads "that situated news in the history of, say, bail and mass incarceration." As people began sharing his threads and approaching him about them, he thought, "How can I make this engagement actually educational?" Karakatsanis acknowledges the increasing difficulty of posting on X, now that it's harder to embed links. "You have to think about the algorithm … how to frame the first tweet, build suspense, then give people a place to go to learn more." After the George Floyd protests, Karakatsanis, who founded the carceral reform nonprofit Civil Rights Corps, began critiquing public assumptions and media coverage about crime. Many of his threads, he said, are in response to requests from educators, advocates, and even journalists themselves. He publishes, he said, "in

service of a shared goal—to counter a lot of the propaganda around crime." His tweets gave rise to his Substack newsletter; his 2019 book, *Usual Cruelty*; and *Copaganda*, which will be published next year.

Parker Molloy

If Parker Molloy (**@parkermolloy** on social platforms) has worn many hats over her long career—editor, award-winning media critic, freelance essayist—she's brought them all to her eclectic and winningly conversational newsletter of political and cultural commentary, The Present Age, which showcases her keen eye and sophisticated critical skills. The Present Age is an excellent destination for people who want to break free from fast-and-loose takes or analysis that gets laden with in-group shorthand. This is part of the plan, Molloy told TNR: "When I'm writing a newsletter, I'm doing so with two distinct groups in mind: journalists and the average politically minded American. If members of each group can read one of my posts and come away with a new outlook on things, I'd call that a success, even if their outlook isn't a mirror of my own."

Bisan Owda

Bisan Owda, 25, is a Palestinian community activist and filmmaker turned war correspondent by the inescapable crush of Israel's war on Gaza. Before the war reached the Gaza native's doorstep, she worked with the United Nations on gender equality and the European Union on climate change. She also hosted her own TV show, *Hakawatia* (the Arabic word for "storyteller"), leveraging social platforms to speak on women's rights in the Middle East. Since October 7, Owda has radically transformed her social media presence, dedicating herself to providing glimpses into the horrors and humanity from the Gazan side of the war front. In TikTok and Instagram videos, Owda (**@wizard_bisan1**) captures the emotional toll of the conflict—filming children protesting for a cease-fire, the desperation for food amid a systemic starvation, the tent cities built by the displaced, and, against it all, the will of the people to survive and thrive. Even

Waleed Shahid

before the war broke out, Owda had a powerful philosophy about the might of social media. "Online content plays a major role in shaping our conception of the world, opinions, and values," she told UN Women, an agency promoting gender equality. "Through influencing public opinion, social media is also one of the most effective tools to mobilize and advocate for change." Despite this, *The Times of Israel* has derided her as a "professional Hamas propagandist." Still, she persists: "Hey everyone, it's Bisan from Gaza, I'm still alive."

Hasan Piker

If you haven't heard of the Twitch livestreamer Hasan Piker at least once, you might be living under a rock. Piker's goal is simple, he explained to TNR: "Make left-wing politics more accessible and more easy to digest." With nearly 2.6 million followers on Twitch alone, Piker (**@HasanAbi** on Twitch; **@hasanthehun** on X; and **@hasandpiker** on TikTok and Instagram) is helping shape an entire wing of the progressive community. Nevertheless, he insists modestly that he is "not a serious figure by any means": "Honestly, I'm still a himbo at the end of the day." But he understands the role that the media plays in politics, and he wants to fight back against right-wing propaganda and indoctrination. If he gets even one person to change their mind, he told TNR, that's a win. "I've tried to use my privilege for good as best as I can," he said. "I think my goal is to get transphobic people to not be transphobic, right? My goal is to get racist people to not be racist." That's no short order, he acknowledged, but he'll take it one stream at a time. Meanwhile, he'll probably keep calling out Democrats for yelling at progressives in the face of rising fascism.

Jason Slaughter

Cities would be better if they were designed with people in mind, not cars. That is the fundamental belief animating the videos of Canadian YouTuber Jason Slaughter, who runs the wildly popular channel Not Just Bikes. Slaughter cares about the environment, and he laments the pollution that cars cause, but these are not the only reasons he promotes walkable cities and critiques car-dependence. A more basic and strategic rationale is at work in Not Just Bikes, where videos with titles like *Why City Design Is Important (and Why I Hate Houston)* get millions of views: As Slaughter has put it, his premise is simply that "driving sucks in car-dependent places." By analyzing cityscapes in an informal and accessible style, and by arguing for the aesthetic and economic benefits of reducing car use as much as the environmental ones, Slaughter's videos make a compelling case for an overhaul in contemporary urban planning across the globe.

Waleed Shahid

Growing up in post-9/11 Arlington, Virginia, Waleed Shahid's Muslim parents told him not to talk about politics, because it would land him in trouble. Naturally, he did the opposite, leaping into progressive activism from a young age. As director of communications for Justice Democrats from 2017 to mid-2023, he oversaw Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's meteoric rise, and left just as the group began to falter. Most recently, Shahid, who goes by **@_waleedshahid** on X, dedicated himself to the Vote Uncommitted movement that rocked Michigan and seeks to do the same elsewhere. "Twitter is primarily a medium where operatives and journalists and organizers live," Shahid told TNR. "Instagram and TikTok are places where voters and regular people live." Users of those platforms also skew younger than mainstream TV news viewers; Shahid may have left Justice Democrats, but he remains an important voice informing young progressives.

Adam Tooze

Once a relatively obscure academic, Adam Tooze, a Columbia economic historian, saw his public profile skyrocket during the pandemic, when readers—including a cohort of younger men memorably dubbed "Tooze Bros" or "Tooze Boys"—flocked by the tens of thousands to his Substack newsletter, Chartbook, so named for its heavy use of visual aids. Tooze is credited with popularizing the term "polycrisis" to describe the interlocking and mutually exacerbating crises—political, social, economic, climatic—that have come to define the post-2008, post-Trump, post-Covid era. "The diverse and open-ended format of Chartbook, its regularity, what some call its relentless pace are responses to the intellectual crisis and disorientation that is the polycrisis," Tooze (**@adam_tooze** on X) explained. The range of material in the newsletter, in which contemporary art, poetry, and film frequently abut data on interest rates and CO2 emissions, offers both Tooze and his audience a "psychological and emotional release," he said, from the stultifying quality of much writing on political economy.

> "My purpose as a journalist—and in life?—is to make people in power uncomfortable. Everything else is noise."
>
> —MEHDI HASAN

Molly White

Molly White daylights as a software engineer in Massachusetts. But online, White is better known as GorillaWarfare, a prolific Wikipedia editor who has written more than 100,000 edits on articles ranging from emo bands to right-wing extremism, fending off disinformation as if it's a full-time job. While White's contributions to the site are vast (she has, in addition, served six years on the digital encyclopedia's arbitration committee), she is also an excellent tech critic in her own right and a reliable skeptic about overhyped arenas in the tech kingdom, offering moments of pause and reflection amid Silicon Valley's headlong breakthroughs and the moral dilemmas they often occasion. To make sense of the whirlwind, White (**@molly0xFFF** on X) has developed a website, Web3 Is Going Just Great, that covers developments in blockchain and cryptocurrencies. "When I saw the cryptocurrency industry beginning to position itself as 'the future of the web' … and beginning to advertise to laypeople," White explained to TNR, "I felt that it was important to expose the dangerous and predatory industry—particularly in a time when I felt the media was mostly buying the hype." She provides witty commentary by way of her newsletter, Citation Needed, and posts regularly to a YouTube channel. At a time when the stakes of technological development could not be higher, it helps to be able to turn to a writer who doesn't just cover digital processes but practically lives within them.

Zooey Zephyr

Montana state Representative Zooey Zephyr came to prominence last year, when the state legislature's far-right Freedom Caucus led the charge to censure her for remarks she made against an anti-trans bill that banned gender-affirming care for minors. Zephyr had told her fellow legislators that she hoped they would recognize the "blood on [their] hands." It was a sentiment widely shared across the country in a year—like the year before, and the year before that—when more state-level anti-trans bills were introduced than ever before. The right's outrage campaign backfired, revealing how Zephyr and her rhetoric were being held to a different standard than her counterparts', and making her a national political figure. Montana is out of legislative session this year, but on social media, Zephyr (**@ZoandBehold** on X) continues to share news from other states' similar anti-trans bills, in posts that focus on the legislators and activists working to stop them. She's part of a broader network organizing against anti-trans legislation—a network moving as fast as bills are introduced and hearings are held—that no single state can shut down. TNR

Unplug the Classroom. Or Reboot It. Just Don't Do Nothing.

Schools must drastically remake their approach to technology—or continue their ongoing collapse into irrelevance.

By Antón Barba-Kay

THE PANDEMIC TRANSFORMED multiple aspects of K-12 education into political gasoline. Since 2021, books have been banned by the thousands from school libraries. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a former teacher, burnished his national profile by capitalizing on his state's "Don't Say Gay" legislation, which limited what teachers could say in class about sexual identity. Glenn Youngkin unexpectedly won the governorship of Virginia by promising parents more control over what children get taught. Textbooks and curricula are under hectic scrutiny. School board elections—usually the sleepiest backwater of American democracy—have frequently become a matter of widespread interest. Yet many of these conflicts are curiously out of sync with the actual experience of kids—who, as digital natives, have ready access to many more kinds of information than happen to be sanctioned by school syllabi. The moral panic about whether Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is too disturbing to be allowed in school libraries comes at a moment when most American children play violent video games and are exposed to online pornography by the age of 12.

These flashpoints are but symptoms of a much larger collision between the digital revolution and our basic expectations of what is good for young people. If it put an end to the fantasy that children can be educated by just a tablet and an internet connection, the pandemic also introduced near universal access

Illustration by Anson Chan

to and acceptance of online screens in schools. Ninety-four percent of school districts provide students with digital devices; well over half of all U.S. classrooms have a digital display in them. At the same time, an accruing body of research links screen time to depression, anxiety, stress, poor sleep, deteriorations in physical health, and other effects adverse to kids' well-being. American teens spend an average of eight and a half daily hours on some screen or other, even as pediatricians recommend no more than a quarter of that. Ninety-five percent of American teens aged 13 to 17 use social media, despite 46 percent of them feeling the worse for it. We are fond of saying that tools and technology are neutral; a hammer may be used for good or ill. But, in the face of evidence about their addictive character—the World Health Organization, for example, now recognizes "gaming disorder" within its *International Classification of Diseases*—certain digital devices call to mind not so much hammers as hits of cocaine.

Indeed, it's becoming apparent that the use of these devices is at odds with education itself. A slew of research has measured the effects of cell phones and other screens on children's capacities to comprehend what they read and to concentrate in general. In one study, Arnold Glass, a professor of psychology at Rutgers, showed that classrooms in which students divide their attention between their studies and a screen used for fun do worse as a whole—that is, sheer proximity to distracting screens lowered grades for all students, whether they happened to be the users of a device or not. In another study, Glass demonstrated that doing well on one's homework has yielded diminishing returns for digital natives. Over the course of 11 years, he measured an increase of about 40 percentage points in the portion of students who did well on homework assignments, but poorly when tested on the same information—presumably because they are helping themselves to digital aids to complete their assignments. "If you have a question, and you look up the answer" on the internet, Glass told me, "a week later, you will remember neither the question nor the answer."

Schools and lawmakers have made some gestures toward addressing these problems. Tennessee, Indiana, and California have passed legislation allowing schools to limit or ban cell phone use during class hours. Florida and Utah legislators have advanced or passed bills that would restrict children under a certain age from having a social media account; Florida also now requires public schools to forbid students from using cell phones during instructional time and to teach "how social media manipulates behavior." New York City has designated social media a "public health hazard" and sued the largest platforms for their effect on children's mental health. More than 200 school districts have filed lawsuits against social media companies for their role in exacerbating teen mental health crises. The White House recently designated a new task force to protect youth mental health, safety, and privacy online. There is near consensus among both parties that cell phones and social media pose a grave threat to young people: the equivalent of a bipartisan unicorn.

The trouble with these expedients is that they don't come near to addressing the scope of the challenge the digital era poses to education as a whole. Social media and cell phone use during class are just two components of a culture saturated with screens. More than 90 percent of American teens have a smartphone by age 14. Banning the devices from class might be an achievement approximately as momentous as prohibiting students with a fully fledged cocaine habit from consuming it while in the presence of a teacher.

Meanwhile, despite the fundamental shifts in our information environment, K-12 pedagogy and curricula have changed relatively little. School still takes the same number of years and covers most of the same disciplines. Much as they have for decades, teachers still mostly stand at the front of a classroom of 20 to 30 students and still mostly explain information from textbooks, comprehension of which is still mostly evaluated by means of the 112 standardized tests that the average American student will take by the end of high school. Kids equipped with state-of-the-art tech are still called on to memorize content and to perform the three "r's" on tests—all in a world in which automation, search engines, and data exchange take the edge off the need for reading, writing, and arithmetic at high levels of proficiency. (When was the last time you performed long division by hand?) An education that asks children to sit obediently at their desks, absorbing facts or competencies they are then called on to produce on standardized tests, makes sense for the training up of a nineteenth-century bureaucracy. It is wholly inadequate today.

Either school should take seriously the ways in which ordinary digital practices are a threat to mental health and learning and teach children how to genuinely pay attention, or it should fully optimize for the digital world and prepare students who are suited to the digital economy. While it would be nice if school could achieve both objectives, it is doubtful that it can: Screens are either a wholesale threat to how kids think or they are not; school should either prepare students for the digital future as thoroughly as possible or develop another mission. The aims of attention and economy are incompatible, the trade-offs incommensurable. It is a question of choosing the best of one world or the worst of both. School must become tech-wary *or* tech-forward—or collapse into irrelevance.

Tech-Wary

A TECH-WARY EDUCATION might proceed in a few different directions. For instance, rather than ignore digital realities, it could introduce students to them gradually, delaying the arrival of screens in order to provide some haven for the development of emotional and attentional capacities. The point would be to help students become moderate and mindful users. Or curricula might be organized around providing students with manual and domestic skills not available in digital terms. The point would be to teach students to work with their hands and to attend to material reality of the sort that would help them be makers and doers (rather than virtual users). Or—in the face of concerns about the influence of social media on teens' mental health, about cyberbullying and online harassment, and about whether social media platforms lend themselves to the sexual exploitation of minors—curricula might focus on fostering offline socialization and habits of mind. The point would be to give children the chance to grow up buffered from the withering gaze of followers, trolls, and creeps, on the theory that young people are readier to reckon with their digital predicaments once they have figured out some baseline of face-to-face civility.

Not all these objectives are compatible. It's hard to see, for instance, how one would prepare students to be mindful users of

A fifth grader learns math on a Chromebook at Markham Elementary School in Oakland, California. Ninety-four percent of school districts provide students with digital devices—even as an accruing body of research links screen time to depression, anxiety, stress, poor sleep, deteriorations in physical health, and other effects adverse to kids' well-being.

A classroom at Williams Elementary school in Springfield, Missouri. Well over half of all U.S. classrooms have a digital display in them.

FROM LEFT: NATHAN PAPES/SPRINGFIELD NEWS-LEADER/USA TODAY NETWORK; PAUL CHINN/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/GETTY

technology while also teaching them to ignore it. But a few schools are beginning to work out these lines of thought in practice.

Waldorf schools—founded in the early twentieth century on the inspiration of the Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner—long predate the digital age. They do not offer a uniform curriculum, but some have started to adapt their educational philosophy to address contemporary concerns about attention and mental health. The Waldorf School of the Peninsula in Santa Clara County, California, for example, offers a moderate, "slow-tech" approach. It has been of periodic interest to the media as a tech-cautious private school that serves a high-tech population in Silicon Valley. (Roughly three-quarters of the students at the school come from families who work in tech.) While the K-12 school cannot control what happens at home, parents receive guidance about delaying kids' use of digital media until seventh or eighth grade, at which time screens are gradually worked into the curriculum with well-defined instructional purposes. Beginning in sixth grade, a program called Cyber Civics introduces students to general conversations surrounding the uses and abuses of tech. In twelfth grade—once students are up to speed with all kinds of digital media—a class on digital literacy addresses how technology changes us as human beings.

The Waldorf approach presumes that children who are given the space to develop at their own pace—through play, offline socialization, and hands-on activities—will gradually learn how to be responsible users of technology. "We are not trying to educate children who will be misfits," said Monica Laurent, a faculty member at the school. "Little children really learn by doing things, by experiencing things, by sensing things, by imitating other children or adults." In Laurent's experience as a teacher, children who wait longer to use screens are more emotionally and socially mature, better able "to interact with people and to face challenges when they come to them." Neurologically speaking, the rationale is solid: A brain less accustomed to easy dopamine hits may be better primed to tolerate discomfort or hard work. But it's unclear whether this curriculum is powerful enough to inform students' extracurricular uses of technology, or whether its main benefit is to secure a semblance of wholesomeness that most appeals to their parents.

The Clear Spring School, a small private, K-12 school in Eureka Springs, Arkansas—an artsy but by no means affluent town—offers a second kind of response to the question of how school should work today, with an emphasis on crafts and labor. Students take classes in sewing and art; they prepare meals; they build things in the woodshop; and they go on semiannual camping trips. "You understand things a lot better if you've done something," explained Doug Stowe, a woodworker and author who taught at Clear Spring School for 20 years. While students have subject teachers, the curriculum does not proceed along disciplinary lines. Crafts are occasions for students to learn the underpinnings of what they are doing: A woodshop project is used as the means of working out math and geometry problems; a meteorology class integrates literature; a field trip teaches students about geology and economics; and so on.

There is no long-standing technology policy here, nor is the curriculum consciously anti-tech—students might use software to map the location of certain kinds of trees in the neighborhood, for instance. The point is not to oppose or take time off from digital technology, but to orient students toward kinds of learning powerful enough to be actually preferable to virtual experiences. It's easy to put cell phones away, Stowe added, "when you have real things to do."

This prepares students for the kinds of work they will likely do—filling out Excel spreadsheets and quarterly HR reports—not by accustoming them to it early but by showing them what else there is. "The best way to prepare for the dismal life is to have a life of joy at the side," Stowe quipped. If a screen is addictive, the

We are fond of saying that tools and technology are neutral; a hammer may be used for good or ill. But, in the face of evidence about their addictive character, certain digital devices call to mind not so much hammers as hits of cocaine.

goal is to bring students into contact with a reality nourishing enough to inure them to it. There's been a proliferation of other similar "portable" programs, like Maplewoodshop in New Jersey, Building To Teach in Virginia, and All Hands Boatworks in Wisconsin, which teach math and science skills through craft projects. Such curricula aim to answer to the digital age by trying to change the subject altogether.

Of course, these schools do not have a monopoly on after-hours or socialization. Some pockets of Christian parents have accordingly started taking a "Postman Pledge" (named for technology critic Neil Postman) to delay or limit their children's use of smartphones and social media, on the theory that the problems are steep enough that they can only be addressed by whole communities of like-minded skeptics. But the only educational institutions in a position to control students' attention whole hog are those as absorbing and totalizing as digital technology itself: boarding schools.

At Midland School—a 90-year-old private boarding high school set in bucolic Los Olivos, California—students perform various forms of manual labor, play sports, ride horses, and spend a lot of time outdoors, in addition to a standard curriculum. The campus buildings have a log cabin, summer-camp aesthetic. The school is not organized around the uses of technology, but it has inevitably had to make decisions about how to limit or monitor devices so as to minimize disruption to its program. Students may not bring their own cell phones to school. (Cell phone service on campus is scant, for that matter.) Phil Hasseljian, the director of IT, oversees their internet use. TikTok and other sites are blocked altogether; Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest are blocked only during the school day. The internet is shut off at night. "There is a built-in 10-hour pause every day," explained Christopher Barnes, the head of school.

The students I encountered there—flushed with the exertions of building an outdoor shower and unloading a truck—were basically very happy with these arrangements, which they compared favorably to previous experiences. E.Z., a sophomore, said that at the school he used to attend, "it felt like kids were less connected to each other." (Midland doesn't share students' full names with the press.) Annika, a senior, agreed. "Everybody would use their phones.... It felt very dystopian." No one seemed to miss their phone.

Plenty of anecdotal evidence suggests that graduates have a more conscientious relationship to technology than average. On the other hand, students expressed some ambivalence and anxiety about their own position. Z. said that because adults at the school aren't subject to any digital restrictions, it could feel as though the students were watched over by "wardens" who weren't "subject to the same rules" that the students were. Annika admitted that she binges on screen time whenever she leaves the school on a break; she worries about not knowing how to moderate her use of tech after graduation. Hasseljian—who is in charge of keeping tabs on students' internet access—"is like God," she joked.

These are the grouses of young people who are bound to push against established (and in loco parentis) limitations. But the dependence of low-tech schooling on high-tech surveillance is a telling one. Hasseljian uses an algorithm to block illicit searches and—in cases of students who are repeat offenders or are struggling with academics—occasionally deprives them of recreational internet access altogether.

If screen time really is more like cocaine than like a hammer, it's conceivable that responsible use is just not possible without centralized, authoritarian intervention. It is hardly an accident that the country that most thoroughly limits kids' screen time is China, which is expressly concerned with the demoralizing effects of what a regulatory agency called "minors' internet addiction." Chinese children are forbidden from bringing cell phones to school; classroom time spent on screens is limited to 30 percent of the whole. Since 2021, strict limits govern when and for how long children may play video games each week. Regulations put in place in 2023 require children's smartphones to operate in "minors' mode," which monitors the quality and quantity of permissible screen time according to the child's age and the time of day. Access is shut off at night. If any of these parameters are infringed, the device automatically closes all apps but those specified as necessary or as exceptions by parents. The ambition and fastidiousness of these regulations are fairly breathtaking. Parents everywhere may view this regime with more envy than they are willing to admit. With a big brother like this, who needs Phil Hasseljian?

Tech-Forward

SO MUCH OF the hype surrounding tech in schools concerns smartphones and social media that it's easy to forget the other devices that come into play in the classroom. A tech-forward education might have several priorities in view. It should actually prepare students for the digital workforce from a young age, accelerating the pipeline from K-12 to a professional vocation, wasting less time on irrelevant subjects, and making digital professions accessible to students from all backgrounds. It might be pursued not simply for economic ends, but to liberate students by making their digital world more legible to them. If automation is about to render all kinds of rote tasks obsolete, digital technology should provide students with a way of expressing authentic human aims. And technology might be used to provide much more nuanced

and tailored feedback to students than teachers are ordinarily in a position to give. The point would be to use digital technology to serve a pedagogical end by doing what it does best: measuring, quantifying, and aggregating data so as to engage each student's capacities precisely where they are.

As in the previous cases, it is doubtful that all these priorities are compatible with one another. For instance, while just about everyone—tech-wary and tech-forward—touts the value of childhood creativity, there is a clear difference between making it a goal of education and paying it lip service as a talking point subordinate to other aims. And none of the tech-forward options I looked at expressed particular concerns about the compatibility of screens with attention spans or mental health. But it's also worth noting that, while most tech-wary schools are private, many tech-forward institutions are in contact with the brute realities of the digital divide and the U.S. public school district.

Burlington school district (in the greater Boston area), an early adopter of the national Computer Science for All initiative, provides computer science education from pre-K through twelfth grade. The district was the first to give iPads to all high school students; now students of all grades get one. Children who do not have internet access at home are provided with Wi-Fi hot spots that connect to the district's internet service provider. "The goal is to get kids ready for an environment that they're going into," Dennis Villano, the director of technology integration for the district, told me. The district, unusually, has no cell phone ban and does not block YouTube or social media. When kids start using technology at a young age, Villano argued, they are more likely to treat it as "just a tool" rather than as "something for fun."

Technology is introduced into the K-12 curriculum in a graduated manner. In elementary school, a team of digital learning coaches teaches lessons meant simply to get the kids excited about technology and computational thinking. Every middle school student takes three years of computer science, when they are introduced to data science and programming languages like Python. Once they reach high school, students are encouraged to join the Innovation Career Pathways program—a grant-funded program started by the state of Massachusetts that supports high school students who want to focus on a high-demand industry, like data science or cybersecurity. More than two-thirds of the seniors at Burlington High School sign up for it.

While this curricular emphasis carries a hint of the indoctrinatory, Villano insisted the goal is not to force people into a narrow range of careers—"a computer scientist could be an artist, a musician, or someone in the medical field," he pointed out. But the Innovation Career Pathways program has a clear vocational purpose, culminating in an internship at a tech company like iRobot or Adobe. When it comes to advancing more equitable outcomes for students of color, from poorer backgrounds, or those for whom English is a second language, the confluence between school and industry can seem largely beneficial.

Still, not all parents are likely to be keen on the idea that their children should be trained to be cogs suitable to a tech juggernaut's machine. Any decent educational program should speak to concerns about its instrumentalization. Mitchel Resnick, a professor of learning research at the MIT Media Lab, offers one answer to the question of how a tech-forward education might develop children's expressive capacities. Resnick is one of the creators of Scratch, a visual programming language that is designed to introduce kids between eight and 16 to the elements of coding in a playful way. Widely adopted by schools and other institutions, the free program has a pool of about 128 million registered users. He is also a co-founder of the Clubhouse Network, a series of 148 free, out-of-school learning centers, in which children from lower-income communities can creatively explore technology with guidance.

Resnick's approach rests on the premise that digital technology is one means of opening up the world for children. While he sees some value in learning coding as a marketable skill, this is not the point of Scratch. Coding is more than that, "a way for people to be able to express themselves." And all children should have the opportunity to engage with it. In other words, Resnick sees digital technology as one medium among many. Excessive use of it is harmful in the way excessive time spent on any childhood activity might be: "If kids spend all day looking at picture books and never go outside, that's not a good thing" either. He insisted that we "focus less on minimizing screen time and focus more on maximizing creativity time."

A central principle of Resnick's thinking is that the nature of work is itself changing so quickly that new kinds of capacities will be necessary to succeed. Because there is no specific body of knowledge that would remain relevant during the time it takes to raise a child, education, he argued, should focus on teaching children to be creative and collaborative under all circumstances. "Providing people a chance to design, create, experiment, and explore leads to a meaningful, fulfilling life," he said. "Those same traits will be the core of thriving in the workplace as well." This might seem like an awfully happy coincidence, and Resnick's idealism sometimes seems so unblinking as to be dewy-eyed. But he admits that this best-case scenario is not inevitable. "A lot of the education system," he acknowledged, "is not being set up that way."

Whichever way this goes, and beyond the question of what children learn, technology is already altering how they learn, with digital personalization. The purpose of this personalization need not be to replace teachers, but rather, as at Quest Academy, a K-9 charter school in West Haven, Utah, it can be to optimize their oversight of students.

Animated by its charismatic middle school principal, Nicki Slaugh, Quest offers computer science from first grade; it's required in sixth through ninth, where students learn coding, digital media arts, and gaming. Students are asked to leave their cell phones or other devices in pockets at the door for the duration of each class period. In each of the half-dozen classrooms that I visited, kids sat facing different directions, doing their own thing on a Chromebook. There is no "front" of the room, though a big-screen monitor on each classroom wall announces the day's general topic. Students start each period by identifying where they are on a rubric of learning objectives, which vary in level from "emerging" to "mastering" and "extending." The teacher and teaching assistant move around the room, working with individual students or in small groups.

The setup allows teachers to scrutinize data about students' performance in real time and allows students to move through some parts of the curriculum at their own pace. "With technology … I've been able to customize and personalize my lessons to meet the needs of kids," Slaugh explained. Seventh graders with higher aptitudes might already be working on ninth-grade math (which will, in turn, free up their trajectory through high school). Conversely, students who struggle are easily identified as needing

more remedial work and attention. While Slaugh insists that no shame is attached to this, it's clear that personalization has the consequence of sorting the highest from the lowest achievers much more efficiently; it makes disparities between students more visible. Each teacher also has discretion over how they program technology into their classroom. Martin Ji, a newish history teacher, explained to me that MagicSchool AI lets him summarize the readings, as well as calibrate those summaries to different levels. Brylee Nelson, an English teacher, uses Nearpod to let students write out their learning objective and then vote on the best version of it. Quest has handily beat state testing averages year after year.

Quest's successes likely have something to do with the school's relentlessly upbeat atmosphere: Teachers greet their students at the door for each period, and students who reach proficiency on an educational standard are applauded by the whole school as the fact is announced over the intercom. The optimizing of technology relies on an ethos of cheer that seems borne of both real human connections and an extensive amount of monitoring and data surveillance. Cameras installed throughout the school can zoom in on every sight and sound—which Slaugh says makes disciplinary disputes rarer. Students report on their mood each class period; their report card includes both academic grades and "citizenship" scores for behavior. Parents have online access to their child's progress. And the predominance of digital assignments means that teachers have instant access to how students are doing and—with a software called GoGuardian—to what they are looking at on-screen at any given moment. Nelson showed me the panopticon of student screens during class. When one of the students opened a tab for non-scholastic reasons, she simply shut it down from her own device. That was that. While students work on their assignments, they will also ask her questions over a chat. "Some of them would rather chat than walk over to me," she added, smiling. "It's a generational thing."

The Choice

MY AIM HERE is not to call a winner between tech-wary and tech-forward alternatives. The way the wind is blowing is clear, in any case—tech is one of the most valuable industries in the United States and computer science one of the fastest-growing majors. It is also unlikely that all students would benefit from a single answer to the question. But it would be dangerous to ignore the magnitude of what is at stake.

One obvious area of difference between tech-wary and tech-forward concerns the status of childhood. Tech-wary schools tend to see childhood as a stage of growth at once essential to human development and in need of a protective enclosure from online sexualization, socialization, and commercialization. "A cell phone in many ways is a portal to an echo chamber," said Joy McGrath, head of St. Andrew's School, a Delaware boarding school that limits students' cell phone and tech use. Being educated offline allows kids the freedom not to grow up quite so quickly. At St. Andrew's, she pointed out, teenagers still play. Play, she argued, "is incredibly important for high schoolers," and its loss is a significant factor in teen mental health.

It's notable that the leading tech-wary institutions I examined are inspired by pedagogical models formulated a century or more ago. They are also private, as a rule. Boarding schools like Buxton in Williamstown, Massachusetts; Midland; and St. Andrew's—as well as the other tech-wary schools I looked at—recruit and offer need-based aid to students from all backgrounds but nonetheless are ultimately available only to a tiny fraction of the population. It's somewhat strange to score the matter of their privilege, since the cost of these schools' technical apparatus is likely insignificant compared to those of a tech-forward education. The privilege is one of the close oversight that students receive from adults, as well as of what tech tycoon and guru Marc Andreessen has recently dubbed "reality privilege"—the privilege of those whose offline lives seem better to them than those they access online.

Besides the mission of preparing students for the future, higher-tech options usually come with the justification that they will provide equitable outcomes for more students. And on the one hand, such an education does offer the possibility of feeding students into the digital workforce, thereby providing them with professional opportunities that are still mostly taken up by white men from college-educated, English-speaking backgrounds. Perhaps childhood (like reality) has become an optional privilege, such that students should avail themselves of the opportunity to skip grades and—labor laws permitting—to take a job earlier than 18. Once kids in his district start meeting with industry leaders, Villano said, "they could easily be given a job in high school."

On the other hand, the pandemic made it clear that access to gadgetry unaided will actually increase inequality. The gap between test scores in low-poverty and high-poverty elementary schools grew by about 20 percent in math and 15 percent in reading during the 2020–21 school year alone. The inescapable reality remains that students most benefit from school with extensive and capable adult attention, which is itself scarce. The 2024 National Educational Technology Plan distinguishes between "access" (i.e., whether students have a device available) and "use" (i.e., whether they are taught how to best employ it) for this reason. More than just putting devices into schools, it is a matter of changing how the devices are taught. "Human development at any kind of scale is incredibly difficult and complicated," said Justin Reich, director of the Teaching Systems Lab at MIT. "Improvements come through a real shoulder-to-the-wheel, long-term, committed approach, rather than silver bullets." In other words, there is no hack for good teachers.

Nevertheless, some districts have pulled off significant digital transformations. Over 15 years, Talladega County Schools in Alabama drastically improved graduation rates by introducing technology programs and training teachers to use them. But comprehensive data is lacking about just what computational skills used under which conditions can make a measurable difference to students' socioeconomic mobility. And when you consider the tremendous economic incentives that tech companies have in the educational industry—in selling schools billions of dollars' worth of hardware and software (which require periodic upgrades) and in training up future users of Apple or Google products—the question of who currently benefits most from the highest-tech arrangements looks different.

But the single starkest difference between a tech-wary and a tech-forward education might be the place and purpose of the book. Neither of the English classes I observed at Quest involved any books. In Nelson's class, some students were working on analyzing two different articles, as well as on a Sprite ad featuring Drake. "We provide rigor and relevance," Slaugh said. In Gigi Zavala's English

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class, students were reading three different online articles—one on McDonald's, one on malls, one on solar pizza ovens—but there was no group discussion or deeper hermeneutical engagement. "We've killed the novel as a group [activity]," Zavala told me.

The boarding school teachers I spoke to, by contrast, commented on how greatly cell phone bans improved the quality of classroom discussion. John Kalapos, co-director of the Buxton School, described the marked improvement he observed in his seminars on literary texts after the school banned smartphones. "Now we have the ability of engaging in more long-form discussion and ideas," he said. It is very hard to quantify, standardize, or put a price on such discussions.

NO MATTER WHERE you stand on the role of screens, the evidence is incontrovertible that school is not going that well. More than half of American adults read below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level. Fewer than half are able to name the three branches of government. Only a small minority think that high school graduates are well prepared for either work or college. Eighty-six percent of schools report difficulties in hiring personnel. The number of people completing teacher prep programs has dropped by about 35 percent over the last decade. The United States spends far more per student than other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, while its proficiency levels are only about average for that group.

But our current crises in education are not of resources, but of purpose. So long as we fail to answer the question of school's meaning for the digital age, education—and public education in particular—will continue to lurch haphazardly between technological innovation and curricular inertia. Indeed, the question is each day being answered for us, heedless and regardless.

Tech-wary and tech-forward are not simply pictures of two educations but of two kinds of human beings and two kinds of Americas. How we evaluate their successes will depend on what we care to make count: If the privilege of reality is the source of a new digital divide, shouldn't we be doing everything in our power to afford it to everyone? Can we simply concede that big tech has wrecked the possibility of mental health, attention, and childhood per se? Conversely, if our tech race with China has existential stakes, shouldn't we do everything in our power to ensure that school is training up the most efficient digital workforce in the world (just as the launching of Sputnik galvanized public education with a new STEM emphasis)? Shouldn't we make sure that children's formative years set them up to succeed in the world they'll live in, instead of wasting so much of their time along the way with origami cranes and information they don't recall?

It's worth acknowledging the partisan divide that roughly maps on to these two pictures. The states and public school districts with the most stringent restrictions on kids' social media access and with the greatest emphasis on parental control tend to be more Republican and culturally conservative. Progressive criticisms of digital technology, on the other hand, tend to focus on the plutocracy of Silicon Valley and uneven access to technology as a source of disparities of opportunity and equity. These political alliances make sense, if one considers that the conservative impulse to limit access to screens is often connected with the desire to limit kids' exposure to ideas deemed upsetting or dangerous, often connected to gender and race. But the alignment is not fully warranted. Limiting access to screens is not necessarily limiting access to ideas; if an onslaught of screens degrades their capacity to think cogently and consecutively about complicated questions, then it matters very little whether kids adopt the right opinions or encounter transformative views, since they will not be able to adequately evaluate or expand on them. The fact that so much of our discussions are about "exposure" to ideas rather than about thinking through them is itself a symptom of this mistake. Why is there no tech-skeptical left to take up this issue?

All parents should be troubled by the worst implications of the digital attention economy for their children. But if, as a nation, we can agree that the protection of childhood should trump the imparting of a digital edge in public schools, then we should also acknowledge that children from some backgrounds will bear the economic cost of this decision far more than others. And if we agree that equity is our highest goal and should be pursued in digital terms, then we should concede that it will be paid for in some children's mental health and capacity to read attentively. It is a cruel choice to have to make.

Yet so long as we do not make it, it will be so much the worse for all of us. Even if their answers are incomplete, the schools I've discussed are nonetheless in better shape than the rest: At least they're attempting to provide a satisfactory answer to the digital revolution, which goes on anyhow. If school is to be anything more than part-time childcare, we must either unplug our children's education or reboot it. Not choosing at all will mean surrendering our minds and our kids' to the lie that characterizes so much of our technological sleepwalking: that it is too late, that we must follow along behind technological development instead of stepping up to shape it. Are we ourselves still able to wake up and pay attention to what our kids most need? TNR

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ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID LITMAN

Words to Live By

What we will lose if AI supplants writing by humans

By Samanth Subramanian

THE MOST NAUSEATING, addictive thing about writing is the uncertainty—and I don't mean the *is-anyone-reading?* or *will-I-make-rent?* kind. The uncertainty I'm talking about dogs the very act. This business of writing an essay, for instance: Which of ten thousand possible openings to choose—and how to ignore the sweaty sense that the unseen, unconceptualized ten thousand and first is the real keeper? Which threads to tug at, without knowing where they lead, and which to leave alone? Which ideas to pick up along the way, to fondle and polish and present to an unknown reader? How to know what sentence best comes next, or even what word? A shrewd observer will note that I am complaining about the very essence of writing itself, but that has been the long-held privilege of writers—and they enjoyed it in the secure comfort of their uniqueness. Who else was going to do the writing, if not the writers who grouse about writing?

Now along come these language engines, with suspiciously casual or mythopoeic names like ChatGPT or Bard, that suffer not an iota of writerly uncertainty. In what can only be called acts of emesis, they can pour out user manuals, short stories, college essays, sonnets, screenplays, propaganda, or op-eds within seconds of being requested for them. Already, as Naomi S. Baron points out in her book *Who Wrote This?*, readers aren't always able to tell if a slab of text came out of a human torturing herself over syntax or a machine's frictionless innards. (William Blake, it turns out, sounds human, but Gertrude Stein does not.) This unsettles Baron, a linguist who has been writing about the fate of reading for decades now. And it appears to be no lasting consolation that, in some tests, people still correctly recognize an author as artificial. Inexorably, version after version, the AIs will improve. At some point, we must presume, they will so thoroughly master Blakean scansion and a chorus of other voices that their output—the mechanistic term is only appropriate—will feel indistinguishable from ours.

Naturally, this perplexes us. If a computer can write like a person, what does that say about the nature of our own creativity? What, if anything, sets us apart? And if AI does indeed supplant human writing, what will humans—both readers and writers—lose? The stakes feel tremendous, dwarfing any previous wave of automation. Written expression changed us as a civilization; we recognize that so well that we use the invention of writing to demarcate the past into prehistory and history. The erosion of writing promises to be equally momentous.

IN AN ABYSMALLY simplified way, leaving out all mentions of vector spaces and transformer architecture, here's how a modern large language model, or LLM, works. Since the LLM hasn't been out on the streets to see cars halting at traffic signals, it cannot latch on to any experiential truth in the sentence, "The BMW stopped at the traffic light." But it has been fed reams and reams of written material—300 billion words, in the case of ChatGPT 3.5—and trained to notice patterns. It has also been programmed to play a silent mathematical game, trying to predict the next word in a sentence of a source text, and either correcting or reinforcing its guesses as it progresses through the text. If the LLM plays the game long enough, over 300 billion or so words, it simulates something like understanding for itself: enough to determine that a BMW is a kind of car, that "traffic light" is a synonym for "traffic signal," and that the sentence is more correct, as far the real world goes, than "The BMW danced at the traffic light." Using the same prediction algorithms, the LLM spits out plausible sentences of its own—the words or phrases or ideas chosen based on how frequently they occur near one another in its corpus. Everything is pattern-matching. Everything—even poetry—is mathematics.

We still don't know precisely how humans grasp language, although it isn't the LLM way; no infant that I know of consumed 300 billion words before saying "Mama." But in his slim new book, *Literary Theory for Robots,* Dennis Yi Tenen, an associate professor of English at Columbia University, proposes that the way we use language to create works bears some similarities to the machines. "Thinking and writing happen through time, in dialogue with a crowd," Tenen maintains. "Paradoxically, we create new art by imitating and riffing off each other." Subconsciously or otherwise, a writer milks inspiration out of libraries and conversations, and draws assistance from dictionaries, thesauruses, and style guides. "We think with our bodies, with tools, with texts, within environments, and with other people." A writer relies in less calculating fashion on the books she has ingested than an AI does, but they've made her into a writer all the same. It was always an error, Tenen writes, "to imagine intelligence in a vat of private exceptional achievement"—to buy into the fable of the writer in her lonely garret, manufacturing words and ideas de novo.

In this notion of distributed intelligence, there is something both democratizing and destabilizing—a sneaky but egalitarian mode of murdering the author. Tenen insists, though, that we shouldn't agonize too much over the source of intelligence. Who cares if our thinking is closer to the synthesis of LLMs, rather than the divinely ordained originality held dear by the Romantics, as long as we have an effect upon the world? Certainly not Aristotle. "In the Aristotelian model," Tenen writes, "intelligence is the GOAL of thought." (The caps lock letters are Tenen's, not mine or Aristotle's.) It's Plato who held

intelligence to lie within the department of the interior—a private, nebulous thing that occasionally led to enlightenment. Pick your philosopher.

Even at the summit of literary creation, fiction writers yielded to the seeming inevitability of recombination. Tenen's potted history of authorial hacks, the richest section of his book, begins with Georges Polti, an enterprising Frenchman who in 1895 published a book called *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations,* to help dramatists write new plays. Once you'd eliminated supplication, deliverance, vengeance, pursuit, disaster, revolt, and the other 30 symptoms of the human condition, he implied, what else was left? (Polti wasn't afraid to get specific: Among the subtypes of the "pursuit" situation were "pursuit for a fault of love" and "a pseudo-madman struggling against an Iago-like alienist.") "They will accuse me of killing imagination," Polti wrote, but in fact, his primer aspired to free playwrights from the pursuit of mere novelty, so they could devote themselves to truth and beauty. Mark Twain invented a self-gumming scrapbook for authors, into which they might paste notes, newspaper snippets, and images, for subsequent inspiration. (His secretary once filled six scrapbooks with clips about the Tichborne trial in London, involving a no-name butcher who claimed the title to an English peerage. Twain concluded that the tale was too wild to be of use to a "fiction artist"—but it did form the basis of Zadie Smith's latest novel, *The Fraud*.) Companies sold devices like the Chautauqua Literary File and the Phillips Automatic Plot File Collector, into which writers stuffed their reference materials, so that they could later pluck out a setting, a character, or the seed of a plot. It was ever thus, Tenen implies—the magpie approach to thinking, the collage as the modus operandi of writing. Why are we unnerved by LLMs following those same principles?

WHEN I REACHED this juncture in *Literary Theory for Robots,* I let out a silent, screaming plea for our species. The art of the novel doesn't lie in the combine-harvesting of details and plotlines. It lies in how a writer selectively filters some of them through her own consciousness—her deliberations, the sum of her life, the din of her thoughts—to devise something altogether different and more profound. This, and only this, makes any piece of writing meaningful to those who read it. The AIs of the future may meet other yardsticks for creativity. They may, say, grow aware of themselves as creators, satisfying the neurosurgeon Geoffrey Jefferson's dictum that a machine will equal the brain when it not only writes a sonnet but also knows that it has written it. Their cogitations may seem as bleary and inscrutable as those of humans. (Already we are hard-pressed to say how precisely some hallucinations emerge from AIs.) But they will never have experiences the way we have experiences, I quarreled with myself. They can't lose a friend to suicide, or feel the pain of a twisted ankle, or delight at their first glimpse of the rolling Caucasus, or grow frustrated in a job, or become curious about Dutch art. (And that was just my 2023.) Any texts they furnish will be intrinsically hollow; they will fail to hold us, like planets without gravity. Or so I contended.

But not very far into Baron's *Who Wrote This?,* I realized I was being defensive—that I was arguing for a special exemption for writing and language because I consider them such immutable aspects of the mind, and of being human. Baron, with the dry eyes of an actuary, sets about deromanticizing writing. She presents classifications of creativity—ranging from the "mini c" creativity of personal satisfaction, where you tweak the recipe of a peach cobbler at Thanksgiving, through the "little c" rung of winning a county fair ribbon for said recipe, up to the cobbler-less "Pro C" of professional creations like the *Harry Potter* series and the "Big C" league of Shakespeare and Steve Jobs.

Baron invokes these distinctions in part to understand human creativity. But she is particularly interested in whether AI imperils the Big C. She points out that the high art of literary writing is merely a sliver of all writing turned out by humanity. Much of the rest is "everyday writing by everyday people," and it includes grocery lists, birdwatching journals, emails, social media status updates, and office memos. Another subset—Baron loves her taxonomies—consists of writing for professional or financial gain. Here rest advertising copy, chemistry primers, white papers, earnings reports, and business case studies—texts to which we rarely look for deep meaning, "Big C" creativity, or personal connection. Not only will AIs be capable of producing these artifacts of writing, but a reader will feel no acute sense of loss in discovering where they came from. Tenen would note that, even today, such texts already repurpose previous writing to a large extent. To resent AIs for similarly relying on the work of others would be as fatuous as dismissing a novelist who employs a spellchecker to correct his usage of "who" and "whom."

Both Tenen and Baron are cautious boosters of AI, saluting its potential to relieve us of many "lesser" forms of writing. But they also predict that more literary writing—Big C writing—will resist the encroachments of the machines. "It's simply that, however effective or powerful, a muscular artifice for the sake of artifice isn't that intelligent or interesting to me," Tenen says. For truly human writing, an AI needs to gain a wider sense of the world, he adds. "But it cannot, if words are all it has to go by." A machine cannot (as yet) watch a film to review it, and it cannot (also as yet; one must cover one's rear) interview legislators to write a political feature. Anything that it produces in these genres must be confected out of reviews and interviews that have already been written. That lack of originality, Tenen would contend, will forever keep true creativity beyond the reach of AI.

Still, I remained unsure. One might argue that it is always the audience that creates meaning out of a text—that a book is merely a jumble of words until it provokes responses in a reader, that the act of reading summons the book into being. In doing so, we wouldn't just be going back half a century, to reader-response theory

Who Wrote This?: How AI and the Lure of Efficiency Threaten Human Writing
by Naomi S. Baron
Stanford University Press,
344 pp., $30.00

Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write
by Dennis Yi Tenen
W.W. Norton & Company,
176 pp., $22.00

and Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author." More than a millennium ago, the Indian philosopher Bhatta Nayaka, in a literary treatise called *Mirror of the Heart,* reasoned that *rasa*—the Sanskrit notion of aesthetic flavor—resides not in the characters of a play but in the reader or spectator. "Rasa thus became entirely a matter of response," the Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock wrote in *A Rasa Reader,* "and the only remaining question was what precisely that response consists of."

Bhatta Nayaka today, digesting the relationship between our AIs and us, would ask us an uncomfortable question. If, in a blind taste test, some readers are moved by a poem or a short story by ChatGPT, will we continue to prize their experience, and hold their response to be more important than anything else? It's bound to happen, at some point—and the computers don't even need to be sentient to get there. Alan Turing knew it. In his 1950 paper, when he proposed an inquiry into the question "Can machines think?" Turing swerved quickly into the question of whether machines could play the imitation game—whether they could merely fool human beings into concluding that they were thinking. The outcome, for all practical purposes, is the same—and the difference between moving us and fooling us isn't as great as we'd like to believe.

SO MUCH FOR readers. But what of writers? The twentieth century is cluttered with the vacated chairs and discarded uniforms of workers whose jobs have been automated. Human hands once stuffed sausages, riveted cars together, and transferred calls in telephone exchanges. Once again, it is tempting to claim an exemption for writing. "Because mind and language are special to us, we like to pretend they are exempt from labor history," Tenen notes. But "intellect requires artifice, and therefore labor." In the commercial sphere, a lot of writing is not so far removed from sausage-making—and the machines have already begun to encroach. Realtors use ChatGPT to pump out listings of houses. The Associated Press turns to AI models to generate reports on corporate earnings. Context, a tool owned by LexisNexis, reads judicial decisions and then offers lawyers their "most persuasive argument, using the exact language and opinions your judge cites most frequently." When you consider that some judgments are now drafted by AI as well, the legal profession seems to be on the cusp of machines debating each other to decide the fate of human beings.

We write to reach out, to convey the squalls and scuffles in our souls. To have AI strip all that away would be to render us wordless, thoughtless, self-less.

It won't do to be snobbish and describe these kinds of writing work as thankless, because they have occupied people who have been thankful for the income. Roughly 13 percent of American jobs are writing-intensive, and they earn more than $675 billion a year. Many of these jobs are likely to evaporate, but when this is aired as a concern, the champions of automation have a standard lexicon of liberation. "Freed from the bondage of erudition, today's scribes and scholars can challenge themselves with more creative tasks," Tenen writes. If he'd been speaking that sentence, perhaps he'd have ended it with an upward, hopeful lilt? Because little about the modern economy suggests that it wishes to support even the creative writers who already live within it, let alone the thousands on the verge of being emancipated by AI.

However, there is supposedly freedom on offer for novelists and poets as well. In one of Baron's scenarios, AI tools provide the divine spark: "Think of jumpstarting a car battery." But cars start the same way every time, and they really just need to reach their destinations. For writers, trite as it sounds, it's about the origin and the journey. In the cautionary parable of Jennifer Lepp, as narrated by Baron, the writer is cold-shouldered out of her own writing. Lepp, a one-woman cottage industry turning out a new paranormal cozy mystery every nine weeks, recruited an AI model called Sudowrite as an assistant. At first, Sudowrite helped her with brief descriptions, but gradually, as she let it do more and more, "she no longer felt immersed in her characters and plots. She no longer dreamt about them," Baron writes. Lepp told The Verge: "It didn't feel like mine anymore. It was very uncomfortable to look back over what I wrote and not really feel connected to the words or the ideas."

Here, at last, is the grisly crux: that AI threatens to ruin for us—for many more of us than we might suppose—not the benefits of reading but those of writing. We don't all paint or make music, but we all formulate language in some way, and plenty of it is through writing. Even the most basic scraps of writing we do—lessons in cursive, text messages, marginal jottings, postcards, all the paltry offcuts of our minds—improve us. Learning the correct spellings of words, according to many research studies, makes us better readers. Writing by hand impresses new information into the brain and sets off more ideas (again: several studies). And sustained writing of *any* kind—with chalk on a rock face, or a foot-long novelty pencil, or indeed a laptop—abets contemplation. An entire half-page of Baron's book is filled with variations of this single sentiment, ranging from Horace Walpole's "I never understand anything until I have written about it" to Joan Didion's "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." Sometimes even that is prologue. We also write to reach out, to convey the squalls and scuffles in our souls, so that others may see us better and see themselves through us. The difficulty of writing—the cursed, nerve-shredding, fingernail-yanking uncertainty of it—is what forces the discovery of anything that is meaningful to writers or to their readers. To have AI strip all that away would be to render us wordless, thoughtless, self-less. Give me the shredded nerves and yanked fingernails any day. TNR

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ILLUSTRATION BY ELLEN WEINSTEIN

Break It Up

Embracing the risks of the divorce memoir

By Laura Kipnis

ALLOW ME TO impart some important life advice: Do not divorce, or allow yourself to be divorced by, a memoirist. Regardless of what a marital saint you were, you're not going to come off well in the retelling—if a public reckoning with an ex's crimes weren't somewhere on the agenda, would the divorce memoir exist as a genre in the first place? Nevertheless, dissecting a marriage at book length is a high-risk wager for an author: You will lay yourself bare for our scrutiny, and we will take your side. But will we?

Leslie Jamison's *Splinters* and Lyz Lenz's *This American Ex-Wife* are willing to chance it. For one thing, there's shame to be expiated—both were the ones who chose to leave, and fear being judged badly for it. Plus the guilt—both had young children (Lenz's were two and four, Jamison had a 13-month-old). But after grappling with a similar question—Is it legitimate to break apart your life to be happier?—both ultimately found divorce liberating. Outweighing the sorrow of ending relationships are, for both, relief and, even at this late date, the glow of hard-won victory—independence reclaimed from yellow-wallpapered

conjugal enclosures. Jamison: "Once you're finally out of a broken marriage, it feels like you're just dripping with love." Lenz: "True freedom and power begin with refusal."

At a time when the discontentedly coupled are turning to energetic remedies for ailing marriages like swinging and polyamory—the couple that strays together stays together—it's almost refreshing to hear anyone favor just euthanizing the patient. Lenz's is the more political book, packed with stats about gender inequity and marshaling all the pragmatic reasons other women should follow her example, namely economic freedom from men and liberation from household drudgery. Jamison is more ruefully attuned to the way divorce means living with absent presences, the ghosts of past lives that didn't happen. Both books occasionally left me pondering the wobbly distinction between candor about ex-intimates and score-settling, even when artfully executed.

Among the cul-de-sacs of modern coupledom is that the intimacy you once craved with a beloved also requires ongoing proximity to another needy human's most jaggedly uncensored self, which is likely to be exactly what ends up putting you off them. Their deepest selves turn out to be rigid, angry, lying, and petty; they're a bottomless well of hurt wrapped in sarcasm. There's such a thing as getting to know someone too well, knowledge which can, of course, be weaponized, not to mention transcribed for literary posterity.

WHEN JAMISON MET the novelist she calls C, she was 30; he was a widower in his mid-forties whose wife had died after a protracted battle with leukemia. They married after six heady months, eloping at a Las Vegas wedding chapel. There are some lovely sentences about him—"Falling in love with C … was like ripping hunks from a loaf of fresh bread and stuffing them in my mouth." He got her face tattooed on his bicep. He was offbeat and made her laugh.

The marriage lasted five years, though they were in couples therapy the last four. The schisms kept growing, including tensions about disparities in their levels of career success. His first novel did well, while the second, a semi-autobiographical account of his first marriage, didn't. Jamison's bestselling essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*, had been a breakout hit. Compounding the injury, her latest book garnered acclaim and a 19-city publicity tour. He attempts to handle this graciously, though she also reports him once saying before a party, "I'll be damned if I'm going to stand there holding your purse."

Aha, one thinks—do I smell emasculation fear? Jamison is a savvy enough writer not to spell it out, also to emphasize that she's telling just one side of the story. But as a well-known literary figure whose name will forever be linked, for better or worse, with the word *empathy,* she has a fan base that requires her to be relatable, thus she has some impression management to accomplish. When it comes to abandoning a man whose first wife had died tragically young, leaving him grieving and traumatized—who's going to root for her in these circumstances, she admits to worrying.

The specter of C's first wife loomed large in the marriage: "another woman's death was nestled inside every moment between us. It was the house we lived in." Jamison wants to believe she can repair C and assuage his suffering, though then there are occasions such as her talking about having had an eating disorder, and him interrupting to tell her how little his wife had weighed when she was dying. It leaves her feeling trivial by comparison, though also "some part of me had wanted to finish my sentence."

Such is Jamison's deftness at scene-sketching that an entire universe of botched reciprocity can be glimpsed in that moment, and the kernel of every disenchantment to follow. But how can one puny relationship encompass every injured party's sensitivities and traumas simultaneously? How to adjudicate the clash of competing wants and wounds: I need *this* from you, but you're giving me *that*.

Also C turns out to have anger issues. She's drawn to his rough edges, less so to living with someone so easily affronted and short-tempered. His work is never going well. He can be mean. Daily life becomes a minefield of barbed comments that leave her frayed. He says a lot of shitty diagnostic things about her, none of which she's forgotten, because some part of her believes them. According to him, even though she's managed to convince the world she's a good person, it's all a facade—the true story is selfishness and ambition, "the virtue-signaling others mistook for virtue." Jamison doesn't defend herself, just lets his comments sit there stinking. "Where others looked at me and saw kindness, he saw the elaborate puppetry of a woman desperate for everyone to find her kind."

When couples get this nastily ontological, they're obviously spiraling the drain, but one of Jamison's subtler talents turns out to be dexterity at table-turning. With the skill of a jiujitsu master, she neutralizes the opponent with his own weapon—repeating his taunts makes him look worse than she does. If she gets a little bloodied in the process, she also wins on sympathy points, which perhaps lends credence to his cynicism about her need to secure approval; but he's vanquished by that point anyway. If you're familiar with Jamison's work, C's assessments don't necessarily seem wrong, they're possibly even astute—she surrounds herself with yes-men, he charges, "part of an elaborate internal machinery designed to secure praise and affection from other people"—but the cruelty of him saying it is her get-out-of-jail-free card.

Reading the grisly details of other people's fractured intimacies can be perversely fascinating, though in this case also disquieting, because C's identity is no secret. And because, as Jamison explains in a brief paragraph, she's agreed with C's request not to write about his child from his first marriage. In other words, there was another person present throughout the relationship: C had been a single father when they met, making Jamison a stepmother when they married. The reader is left to fill in an even more painful story than the one Jamison is able to tell, because leaving C also meant leaving a child who'd already lost a mother. This is the kind of thing people love to judge.

After they separate, C's meanness gets, no surprise, worse, which at least validates her decision to leave. "Why don't you eat something, you anorexic bitch?" she reports him shouting during one of their twice-a-week child drop-offs. On another occasion, when she asks him to speak to her less angrily, he retorts, "I speak to you like you deserve." His anger is protecting him from grief, she hypothesizes when he spits at (or maybe just distressingly near) her, after he's had to wait 10 minutes outside her apartment because her buzzer is broken. A friend says that C's anger is a sign of how much he loved her, but by then Jamison has decided it's just who he is, and readers are likely to concur—you'd have to read very energetically against the grain to conclude differently.

Even if it's an elegant hit job, Jamison is such a sheepishly charming persona on the page: Despite her shrewd observational acuity, she's in a perpetual state of self-bafflement. Saddled with a psychology that demands her existence be justified, which

necessitates "frantic" ambition, she's so self-lacerating that she'll happily accuse herself of every manner of failure, even that writing is a form of self-love and thus a kind of poison. She's aware that people who want too many contradictory things from the universe can be exhausting—a friend confesses needing to step away because of drama fatigue—but the insatiability is also, she knows, her superpower as a writer; her big subject is the "great emptiness inside," the only thing she ever really writes about. The compulsive self-effacement is a great way of deflecting her readers' potential judginess: She is, after all, enviably talented, successful, and prolific, or, in the contemporary arsenal of finger-pointing, "privileged"—apologies for which arrive punctually.

Such are the hoops the socially attuned memoirist must negotiate. In addition to being adept at this, Jamison has a genius for quirky lyricism, for stretching the emotional lexicon into unexpected configurations. She knows her way around what T.S. Eliot called an objective correlative: Every children's book she reads to her daughter, even if ostensibly about animals having picnics, is the story of her leaving her marriage; in Donald Judd's cold and withholding sculptures is her relationship with her father and all subsequent impassive male faces; every cheesy movie plot evokes her own ordeals and yearning and disappointment. All this eloquence and self-scrutiny doesn't appear to produce any greater contentment or self-ease, nor relationship success; it's just a pathway to linguistic originality.

IF THEY RAN a contest for the best reasons to get divorced, Lyz Lenz would win hands down (a bigamy revelation would be a distant second). The whole time she was married, she seemed to be always mysteriously losing things. Her husband calls her absent-minded, and she agrees—she'd mislay her head if it wasn't attached, etc., etc. Then, during a bout of spring cleaning, she discovers, stuffed behind the old wedding decorations in the basement crawl space, a box containing every item she thought she'd lost—coincidentally all items her evangelical husband disapproved of. A mug with the slogan WRITE LIKE A MOTHERFUCKER. A copy of *Madame Bovary.* Two favorite shirts. Their couples therapist makes him promise to stop hiding her stuff. (Is this really a sufficient response?) Six months later, another missing item—a little wooden sign that said, DRINK UP, WITCHES (one can't help suspecting it was on display to goad him)—and she's finally out the door.

This is a raw, angry, rabble-rousing book: "Do you want to know how I finally got my husband to do his fair share? Court-ordered fifty-fifty custody, that's how." For Lenz, the price of marriage was the loss of her entire self, and she's decidedly bitter about the enterprise as a whole—"a political and cultural and romantic institution that asks too much of wives and mothers and gives too little in return."

One of eight children, raised in small-town Texas and South Dakota by deeply conservative parents, Lenz pledged her purity to Jesus and her daddy at age 16 in exchange for a gold ring symbolizing chastity (though Daddy was himself a bit of a hound dog—as was Jamison's father, incidentally). She attended a Lutheran college in southern Minnesota, and got engaged at age 22. Her fiancé was, it was clear—and well before they married in 2005—an uptight, controlling prig. He said her college friends were bad influences, and that she should keep her distance from them. Committed to faith and abstinence, he refused to sleep with her before marriage and wouldn't allow wine to be served at the wedding. Lenz had wanted to keep her maiden name, having been published under it by then; he insisted she take his. On all this she acceded.

Married life somehow failed to make him any more of a compromiser. Reluctantly, Lenz moved to Cedar Rapids for his job, with promises that someday they'd move for hers (which never happened). They buy a horrible moldy house that comes to seem like a metaphor for their marriage. He's bossy about the renovations and, ever the gaslighter, insists the rot doesn't smell as bad as she thinks. Much of the book is devoted to housework wars: She wants him to do some, he wants her to write less. He tries to persuade her to have a third kid rather than embark on a book: "It soon became clear I could be successful or I could be married." Though he's "a good man," the sex sounds awful—Lenz has some tart things to say about men's failures of reciprocity in oral sex—and after 11 years and countless couples therapy sessions, she's done.

But, as Lenz herself says, her husband never pretended to be anyone other than who he was: someone who wanted a trad-wife. She was the one who changed. That's a fascinating story, but the book is wrongly framed, reaching too often for sweeping pronouncements about sex and gender: "Women and their work have always been disposable"; "We make women feel brave for sticking it out"; "We tell ourselves that

The Feeling Is Mutual

by Jonathan Wells

So is the road, the vehicle,
the painted line, the shoulder.
So are the clouds, the gaps between,
the labor below, the trenching, the depth
and what we worked and what
we found. So is the time it took
to strike bedrock, to step
on the shovel, dig the spade,
to forge the ditch, to lay the trough
so water will flow across the pasture.
So are the wildflowers, the clearing,
the copse, the wells. So are the bulls
lumbering over and bowing down.
So is the thirst that opens their throats.

Jonathan Wells *is the author, most recently, of the novel* The Sterns Are Listening.

true love happens completely outside of the forces of culture and time." But Lenz isn't *the* American ex-wife. She is chronicling a highly specific milieu: white evangelical Trump country. Breaking ranks with religious traditionalism meant breaking not just with her husband, but with a tribe devoted to controlling women's bodies and, not incidentally, shoving their doctrine down the rest of America's throat.

Her husband, no surprise, supported Donald Trump in 2016, while Lenz voted for Hillary Clinton. The connection between their domestic miseries and the evangelical political agenda, between her husband's Trumpism and the inequalities in their marriage, would have been a great subject to explore, but Lenz turns to generalities instead. It's a very didactic book—like most converts to a cause, she wants to instruct a flock—but the lessons are rote ones, marshaling citations from Henrik Ibsen, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Susan Faludi, and Arlie Russell Hochschild to make familiar arguments about equal pay, housework inequities, and the disparities in women's sexual pleasure versus men's. It's like Feminist Groundhog Day.

The one feminist issue we never hear about, oddly, is abortion. I take her Clinton vote to mean she's pro-choice, and her husband's Trump vote to mean he was not. What kind of conversations did that entail? Or birth control discussions, or prenatal testing decisions? We don't hear, though Lenz does report discovering in year seven of their marriage that her husband was anti–gay marriage, leaving her "stunned and embarrassed." But could this possibly come as news to someone who'd married a sex-fearing evangelical?

It's not that gender inequalities don't persist in secular America, but they persist differently than in the tradition-bound world Lenz inhabited. The more she strives to present herself as Everywoman, the more empty truisms pile up: "Sexuality is a spectrum, and so are our relationships," "Divorce is both personal and political," "Rarely do we consider what must be exchanged for a life lived with someone else." The condescension started making me querulous—I feel pretty sure that literary history is teeming with tales of marital self-mutilation, and that lots of us have considered them plenty, not that such a reading program necessarily improves things on the domestic front.

This framing is too bad, because when Lenz observes the world she knows, as she did in a previous book, *God Land,* she's textured and insightful. The journey from evangelical to Hillary voter to divorcée is meaningful not because it's the shared condition, but because of what a rare bird it makes her, a minority of a minority. Despite their outsize political clout, only 14 percent of the electorate are white evangelical Christians, and a mere 16 percent of them supported Clinton. But if women in the heartland are in the throes of late-breaking feminist rage, fleeing their Trump-voting, bad-in-bed husbands, this is great news. Welcome aboard, all escapees and renegades!

Splinters: Another Kind of Love Story
by Leslie Jamison
Little, Brown and Company,
272 pp., $29.00

This American Ex-Wife: How I Ended My Marriage and Started My Life
by Lyz Lenz
Crown,
288 pp., $28.00

POST-SEPARATION, BOTH LENZ and Jamison embarked on sex and dating sprees involving apps, shifty men, and self-discovery; freedoms are regained, dignity is lost. Both think it's their fault when men dump them.

Jamison is drawn to trouble and intensity—she's not giving up on recklessness, and good for her. She meets a charismatic traveling musician with tattoos and healed cutter scars on his arms, who finds monogamy impossible, fucks her in ways she's never been fucked, and gives her chlamydia (about which she's amusing—googling whether it can be transmitted through breastfeeding, a nice little glimpse at the perils of wanting everything). She yearns, improbably, to tame him and settle down together (there's also a hilariously self-deluded sentence about feeling maternal toward his other girlfriends), though his self-mythologizing starts to strike her as a failure of imagination, a way of staying stuck: "He was a man in love with the way he broke things." Even when Jamison is skewering men, she doesn't reduce them to their gender: Each is a motley collection of specifics. The problem is that she keeps seeing through them—and thus does hotness fade.

Lenz finds herself equally baffled by her desires: "So much of my life had been ruined by men.... And yet, I still wanted them." She discovers at long last that sex can be pleasurable, though the men she meets are invariably assholes. Including or especially the supposedly enlightened liberals and male feminists, one of whom rapes her in his apartment, though she doesn't use that word.

An inherent risk of the divorce memoir is that the memoirist, naturally steeped in resentment and tacit self-exoneration, may be the person least equipped to tell the story. You end up second-guessing them, as when Lenz says, about her husband's anti-gay politics, "How had I failed to see the truth?" or asks plaintively, "How had I gotten here?" Well, as she herself says, marriages are built on intentional ignorance. Which is also the pitfall for confessional writers generally: You're producing a map of your blind spots, and if you do it at all well, your readers will likely come to feel they know you better than you know yourself.

When Jamison mentions loving a line from G.K. Chesterton—"How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it. You would find yourself under a freer sky, in a street full of splendid strangers"—I couldn't help noticing that it was an aspiration supremely at odds with the emotional maximalism of her book and its relentless interior gaze, none of which is exactly a self-reduction plan.

Would the divorce story of one of these imaginary slimmed-down selves be in any way interesting? The thing that makes divorce memoirs so compelling is knowing what an ongoing calamity it is to attempt to merge two gargantuan interiorities. But such is our condition, living as we do in self-besotted times. We're very avid about ourselves! Perhaps most of all. It makes even the failed mergers poignant. You spend a lifetime figuring out how to navigate your befuddling, outsize emotions, and then you die, though if you're fortunate, you'll have loved and felt loved somewhere along the way by someone willing to put up with you in all your helpless enormity. TNR

Laura Kipnis's *most recent book is* Love in the Time of Contagion: A Diagnosis.

The Making of a Backlash

Judith Butler reckons with the right's crackdown on gender and sexuality.

By Sarah Leonard

MARIE ROUGE/CONTOUR/GETTY

NOBODY IS HAPPY with the state of gender and the family right now, and you can tell a lot about a person's politics by where they turn for solutions. Do they look to a mythical past when men were men, women were women, and daddies ruled public life? If so, you may be looking at a politically conservative person who believes in well-armed national defense, keeping immigrants out, and a wait-and-see approach to climate change. Do they aspire to a future when men and women have dissolved into an infinite spectrum of gender expression and chosen kinship has replaced the nuclear household? If so, you may be looking at a lefty who believes in universal health care, green energy, and eating the rich.

How you feel about gender is a deep thing, emotional, Freudian, tied up with one's deepest fears and one's most intense cravings for love and a meaningful role in society. Gender and sexuality have therefore proved an emotional entry point into politics in general—a fact that no political persuasion has capitalized on as much as rising fascist movements all over the world.

The classic fascist construction of gender is put forward by Viktor Orbán of Hungary, who has insisted that reproduction by the "natural family" is the only way to realize his vision of a strong, ethnically pure Hungarian state. In this construction, both immigrants and feminists are natural enemies. Judith Butler quotes him to set the stage in their new book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*: "In Hungary we had to build not just a physical wall on our borders and a financial wall around our families, but a legal wall around our children to protect them from the gender ideology that targets them." He casts a fluid notion of gender as part of a new orthodoxy, which will punish dissenters—that is, those who hold with a rigid idea of sex-assigned-at-birth-and-never-changed. A recent article in *Hungarian Conservative,* a quarterly published by a government-funded foundation, accuses Butler of being "aggressive" toward people who don't accept "genderism," comparing Butler's approach to the Hungarian Communist Party's repression of free thought, a time when "you had to comply with the system" or a "black car could pull up to your home any time."

The same fixation on creeping genderism has characterized several new right-wing movements. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD—famous for its contempt for migrants—opposes abortion, has vowed to overturn gay marriage, and advocates for a traditional nuclear family model.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party was created in the image of Mussolini's Fascist party, has declared herself a champion of traditional motherhood, giving her small social welfare offerings a natalist bent; has railed against "the LGBT lobby"; and her administration had made moves to remove nonbiological parents from birth certificates. In France, right-wing scion Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally party, opposes gay marriage, though she has promised to protect France's gay community from the supposed threat of Islamist migrants. It's not always easy to separate these positions from the long-standing social conservativism that produced gay panic in the '90s and anti-feminism in the '80s, and maybe we shouldn't—but Butler points to the right's identification of *gender* itself as a problem specific to our moment.

In the United States, this fixation is familiar. The ascendant right has pushed an avalanche of anti-trans legislation in recent years, from banning gender-affirming care to restricting bathroom access to exploiting religious liberty protections to ensure that health care providers and other professionals can refuse to serve trans people. Immigration and gender remain tightly tied (recall Trump's repulsive line that Mexican immigrants are rapists). Within the wild new right, the insistence that climate change is a hoax and critical race theory is making your kid racist sits neatly alongside claims that books about gender turn children gay, learning about sex is tantamount to sex abuse, and telling kids it's OK to have two dads is a slippery slope to pedophilia. Moms for Liberty has set its supposedly wholesome army of caring moms against librarians who include drag story hours and Toni Morrison books in their branches. Gender and sexuality are an essential part of right-wing worldview and provide many of the movement's most provocative rhetorical tools. We are so used to this that sometimes we fail to ask: why?

BUTLER HAS BEEN living the battles over gender for decades. In the early 1990s, they published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,* two massively influential books that challenged the supposed naturalness of sexed identity and normie sexuality. Many readers have experienced these books in contradictory ways—as rather hard to read, but at the same time moving, liberating, and a relief. Our failures to live up to our gender—to act or feel sufficiently masculine or feminine—were not ours alone! And maybe that gender could change, or be something other than male and female. While Butler regularly points out they were not the first to say that gender emerges by repeating certain actions and repressing other thoughts and actions (Simone de Beauvoir: "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one"), they are closely associated with the now-common idea that one's gender is not a biological fact.

These books were responsive to the queer liberation and feminist movements, and Butler's philosophical work remains connected to politics. They have explored a wide variety of topics, including the relationship between mourning and violence in post-9/11 America, the difficulty of being an ethical actor when one can barely know oneself, Palestinian liberation and Jewish ethics, and nonviolence in political struggle.

Nonetheless, it is gender that defines Butler's fame and reputation, and gender that has placed them in a strange position among the rising fascist tides. In 2017, during a trip Butler took to Brazil to speak about democracy, right-wing Christians protested the talks, burned Butler in effigy, and hounded them at the airport. This would seem like an overwrought reception even for a prominent academic, except that rising right-wing forces all over the world, including those led by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (until lately), Vladimir Putin in Russia, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Giorgia Meloni in Italy, have begun describing a global conspiracy of "gender ideology" that they claim will destroy the family, lead to pedophilia, and broadly invite the devil to walk the earth. (Butler recalls being accused in Switzerland of trafficking with the devil.) Butler has come to feature prominently in this gender conspiracy imaginary, alongside George Soros, gender studies professors, queer activists, and feminists in general.

Where Butler's earlier work focused on the potential for liberation, their new book is more concerned with understanding these fears. A lot of the relief that people feel reading *Gender Trouble,* for instance, comes from changing the relationship between their body and their identity, and being able to imagine that relationship changing over time. Conversely, the same possibility of change can have the opposite effect on those whose identity and sense of safety are based on adherence to norms. Butler refers, for example, to a speech Meloni gave in 2022, intimating that gender ideology would mean "the disappearance of women and the death of the mother." Meloni "then called on women and mothers to rise up and fight for their 'sexed identities.'" "If somebody tells you that your entire way of understanding your sex, your sexuality, your embodied life, is subject to destruction," Butler has noted, "then you will respond with fear and anxiety at a somatic level."

Fascists, Butler argues, use gender as a way of gathering up our terrifying shared problems—gaping inequality, precarity, annihilation by climate change, the constant experience or awareness of war—and then allowing us to sublimate the many horrifying structural realities of our time into an emotionally consuming distraction called gender. Butler calls this view of gender a "phantasm" with "destructive powers, one way of collecting and escalating multitudes of modern panics." Naomi Klein recently wrote something similar about the world of online conspiracies, including conspiracies about gender, in her excellent book *Doppelganger.* Klein uses the term Shadow Lands to refer to the vast world of pain that we keep just outside of consciousness—the world of unregulated factories that make our clothes, meatpacking plants, melting glaciers. We respond with anxiety; but, afraid of facing the real problems, we enter the world of fantasy and abstraction.

These panics have deep emotional pull because they respond to real anxiety but are developed in particular directions by powerful international political and religious institutions with vast sums of money. Butler takes on the Roman Catholic Church throughout this book, blessedly unswayed by trendy paeans to the progressive-for-a-priest politics of Pope Francis. No friend to queers, Francis has decried "gender theory, that does not recognize the order of creation." CitizenGO, an advocacy group started by a right-wing Catholic organization in Spain to mobilize citizens against LGBTQ and reproductive rights, has developed digital infrastructure to launch petitions and protests around the world. The entrepreneurial organization now claims to have run anti-abortion campaigns in Malawi, Niger, Tanzania, and Kenya.

Conservative religious groups have gained even more influence as cash-strapped austerity governments turn to religious organizations to fill in basic state functions (this should be familiar to any American who has visited a Catholic hospital). For example, the Ugandan government

runs a precarious postcolonial economy in debt to the World Bank, the IMF, and the Chinese government. The cash-strapped state relies on international institutions to make up the difference. Evangelicals, with an energy to rival the Catholic Church, initially made headway in the country with the rise of neo-Pentecostal churches preaching a prosperity gospel. Twenty years ago, the state redirected money for HIV/AIDS treatment and education to programs sponsored by Christian organizations. George W. Bush reinforced the churches' power by sending $8 million to abstinence-only AIDS prevention programs in Uganda that cast doubt on the effectiveness of condoms and described premarital sex as deviant. When conservative churches provide for people's basic needs, says Butler, "matters of morality regarding sexuality and gender in this context are linked with the provisioning of basic social services, including health care. Thus, they become life-and-death issues." Suddenly, any latent homophobia can be turbocharged by a need for survival.

In the United States, concern about "gender ideology" that mirrors that of right-wing movements around the world seems to be usurping some of the energy traditionally brought to the right by abortion battles (now a losing issue for Republicans in many places) and by gay marriage (now less controversial than it once was). Both evangelicals and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have taken up the fight against trans people, with a focus on what bathrooms trans people may use and limits on gender-affirming care. Butler spends a lot of time unpacking their bad-faith rhetoric here. But less ideological right-wing money also fuels anti-gender campaigns in order to elect Republicans and keep taxes low; spending too much time on their language can seem like dwelling on the suitcase holding a small nuclear bomb. The result, regardless, is a terrifying landscape in which obtaining care for one's trans child is legally designated as abuse in right-wing rhetoric and in Texas.

"A serious harm is done to children who are denied education and care," writes Butler. "That kind of deprivation causes psychic damage, producing a situation in which life itself becomes a form of damage from which they must escape." These kids are sacrificed for the sake of a larger political project. The aim of censorship and bans, writes Butler, "is not just to rally the base but also to produce a form of popular support driven by a passion for authoritarian power."

I'VE BEEN THROWING around the term fascism, but what makes these right-wing movements fascist? Butler notes that the right is engaged in a rights-stripping project to establish a new hierarchy, forcing queer people and women out of public life and criminalizing their health care. In doing so, the right advances an agenda that increases the state's control over what we do with our bodies, what we can say and read. They have tried to consolidate their power by banning books and speech that contradict conservative views, penalizing grade schools and universities, and attempting to criminalize speech that, for example, helps people find abortions. Butler has pointed out that the right constantly accuses the left of fascism, in baffling but inflammatory ways. In Florida and Wyoming, the right has argued that gender studies courses in state-funded colleges subject students to "woke" indoctrination, and that, in order to save students, the courses must be banned. "They want to quash critical thought in the name of doctrine," Butler writes, and "assume that their adversaries want the same."

Of course, in reality, liberals and leftists stand in firm opposition to shrinking rights. Or do they?

Butler points out that a number of left-of-center constituencies have been susceptible to conservative arguments that certain gender identities are not valid. It is easy to find stories of parents who don't want trans kids on certain sports teams, and the United Kingdom seems to be awash in trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs. In some cases, these positions are the result of huge right-wing investment in political campaigns. As *The New York Times* reported in April 2023, organizations like the right-wing American Principles Project conducted polling to figure out that framing anti-trans legislation as a way of protecting children would be most successful, and eventually found that bans on trans girls in sports polled well, in part because they could convince liberals that trans girls playing sports set back cis women's rights.

Who's Afraid of Gender?
by Judith Butler
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 320 pp., $30.00

While these debates often play out chaotically on Twitter/X, animated by anguish and anger, Butler tries to meet them with reason and research. I would offer their surprisingly quantitative section on sports to anyone struggling with questions about hormones, muscle mass, and socialization in integrating sports. They show, for example, that since many cis women have higher testosterone levels than many men, it has proved difficult for the International Olympic Committee to set guidelines defining gender by hormone measurements. In the words of the IOC's science director, "the science has moved on." "If we are in favor of women's sports," Butler writes, "and women are complex, we should be affirming that complexity." Sports operate through social categories, not strictly hormonal ones, and always have. The idea that inclusion in sports is a threat to women rather than a recognition of women properly belongs to the right.

In a long and thoughtful chapter on the TERF phenomenon, Butler writes of the view, which TERFs share with the right, that "gender mutability is an illegitimate exercise of freedom." By TERF logic, trans rights are seen as shrinking instead of expanding women's rights. For example, many TERFs evoke their own traumatic experience of sexual assault and argue that allowing trans women to use women's bathrooms places cis women at greater risk of rape. "To refuse to recognize trans women as women because one is afraid that they are really men, and hence potentially rapists," Butler writes, "is to let the traumatic scenario loose on one's description of reality, to flood an undeserving group of people with one's unbridled terror and fear." In doing so, they replace a feminist analysis of patriarchal oppression with an unreasoning politics of fear. TERFs mirror the gender phantasms of the right by singling out gender fluidity as the Big Bad in a frightening world.

THROUGHOUT THE BOOK, Butler argues for ambitious coalition-building across the left, unifying opposition to unbridled capitalism with support for the kinds of freedom human beings need to thrive: gender freedom, freedom from racism, freedom from colonial violence. This is a fraught project when such a coalition building

must confront not only a better armed and monied right, but a fractious left that is scared, tired of losing, and composed of human beings raised in a highly individualistic clout-building era. Members of such a coalition may at any time decide that the more expedient move is to shed some troublesome members.

The worst possible version of this, not explicitly discussed in the book, is a coalition in which left and right agree on some social spending by shelving vexed "cultural" issues. A recent article by feminist writers Emily Janakiram and Megan Lessard identifies several efforts by conservatives to bring liberals and the left into their orbit. For example, *Compact* magazine, which bills itself as a populist left-right hybrid, takes a pro–social welfare, anti-abortion stance similar to Orbán's. (*Compact* is functionally a successor to *American Affairs,* which tried this same shtick in 2017, flirting with Trump-style conservatism and publishing liberals like James K. Galbraith and John Judis and leftists like Wolfgang Streeck and Slavoj Žižek.) *Compact* founder Sohrab Ahmari's book *Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It,* launched at an event with a socialist interlocutor, presents itself as a left-friendly pro-worker critique of neoliberalism, downplaying his opposition to abortion and queer politics.

Or to take a stranger example, liberal-turned-conservative concern troll Bari Weiss recently convened a panel to debate whether "the sexual revolution failed." The panel featured socialist-left-turned-women's-liberation-skeptic Red Scare podcast host Anna Khachiyan, musician and Elon Musk's ex Grimes, birth control skeptic and host of podcast *Maiden Mother Matriarch* Louise Perry, and Ex-Muslims of North America co-founder Sarah Haider—women who draw on reactionary thought to give their gender politics a little edge. As Michelle Lhooq recently reported for *Lux,* the thrust of the arguments was that sexual liberation had harmed women by making sex consequence-free (i.e., one can use abortion and contraception), and the one thing they could all agree on was that the state should offer more support to mothers. Capitalizing on the star power of Grimes, the event felt like a shaky bid to make anti-abortion, natalist politics cool.

The panelists certainly have allies in the mainstream media. Elizabeth Bruenig of *The Atlantic* has long promoted her own brand of pro-natal Catholic socialism. (Twitter bio: "Christian. Mother. Avid partisan of humankind. Usually joking.") A couple of weeks after the *Dobbs* ruling, she published an essay not advocating for the rights of people to end their pregnancies, but for the pro-life movement to adopt a social welfare agenda that makes giving birth free. (Socialists, of course, have always advocated for free health and childcare—absent the forced birth.)

"Leftists need to be prepared to defend abortion rights," say Janakiram and Lessard, "against a growing tide of self-styled radicals who effusively thunder about their support for robust social welfare programs and labor rights—at the cost of women's bodily autonomy and financial independence from men." Butler alluded to this trade-off in a recent interview, saying, "I think that some men who always saw feminism as a secondary issue feel much freer to voice their anti-feminism in the context of a renewed interest in socialism," and worried about "a return to the framework of primary and secondary" forms of oppression. The fantasy that one can advance the left while catering to the gender politics of the right may be gaining traction at an alarming rate.

The right is engaged in a rights-stripping project, forcing queer people and women out of public life and criminalizing their health care.

IN ORDER TO move forward, the left needs its own compelling view of gender, as forceful, persuasive, and fully integrated as the right's. Versions of this vision exist—in Argentina's Ni Una Menos movement, for example, feminists (fully embracing trans feminists), unions, and racial and environmental justice activists marched together in the street, declaring their struggles linked. The movement has connected IMF debt with personal impoverishment, domestic violence, and the reduction in the social services that would allow women to be autonomous. The idea that raising queer issues will alienate the "real" working class, or that abortion is some sort of liberal issue, betrays not only a fatalism about the core goals of the left, but an ignorance of mass movements beyond U.S. borders. The Green Wave that swept Latin America over the last 15 years has advanced abortion rights there even as they've declined in the United States. Huge feminist movements have won the right in Uruguay, Argentina, and Mexico. U.S. abortion activists recently met in D.C. to learn from their more successful Latin American counterparts.

For a sense of how a new world might feel, what it can offer people in a dark and precarious time, we might also turn to some of the long-standing work of Judith Butler. One of the great virtues of Butler's *Gender Trouble* and their subsequent work has been the incredible generosity of the vision. Every day, most of us wake up and fail to achieve our gender: One can never be feminine enough to embody the ideal woman, and if one is maximally feminine, one no longer fits into mainstream, tasteful gender expression. Abortion is a necessity and a sin. Straight and gay are impossibly cut-and-dried categories for describing the infinite weirdness and fluidity of human sexuality. Traditional gender and family have always been a myth, as can be seen from the utter failure of right-wing leaders to conform to it (AfD is led by a gay woman; Giorgia Meloni recently dumped her sexually harassing partner; Christian Republicans in Congress are affair-prone). Butler's work has offered over and over again the basic kindness of recognizing that our painful failures to conform are what we have in common. Church, culture, and society bear down on us brutally from a tender age, and gender rebels have always been the ones who summon a world of greater mercy. TNR

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ILLUSTRATION BY NINA BUNJEVAC

Beyond the Fringe

A new history shows illiberalism at the center of American politics from the founding to the present.

By Julian E. Zelizer

FOR MUCH OF the twentieth century, the American right was suspiciously absent from historians' grand narratives of the United States. In the early Cold War, social scientists and political theorists held that the United States was exceptional. Because the United States was not born out of a feudal tradition, Louis Hartz famously argued, the country lacked the extremes of left and right that were found in Western Europe. A liberal consensus bound the nation together, for better or worse. National debate perpetually took place within rigid ideological limits. As the renowned historian Richard Hofstadter observed in *The American Political Tradition* in 1948, contestants from the major parties "shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition." However fiercely they competed, they "accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man."

In this view of history, illiberal forces—ranging from xenophobic and antisemitic Populists in the late nineteenth century to a nexus of "Radical Right" anti-communist organizations in the post–World War II

ILLUSTRATION REFERENCE: WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY

period—were characterized as marginal elements that could never withstand the overwhelming power of liberal pluralism. The sociologist Daniel Bell recognized that there was a strain of the electorate that felt "dispossessed" and subscribed to "Protestant fundamentalism … nativism, nationalism." Yet, as he wrote in 1955, he believed that the "saving glory" of the country was that "politics has always been a pragmatic give-and-take rather than a series of wars-to-the-death."

Over the years, historians have chipped away at the liberal consensus. The baby boom generation of historians, coming out of the tumultuous 1960s, emphasized critiques of liberalism from the left, with bottom-up histories that explored the lives of workers, immigrants, Black and Native Americans, and other groups who had often been left out of earlier work centered on presidents, business leaders, and national elites. Indeed, few historians have done as much as Steven Hahn to trace political resistance from the leftward side of the political spectrum. His landmark book, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, provided a history of the changing political economy of Up-country Georgia, which fueled the rise of a Southern populism that challenged individualism and free-market principles. In his Pulitzer Prize–winning book, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Hahn wrote the history of Black resistance to the different manifestations of white supremacy that took hold in the United States, from fighting against slavery to taking on Jim Crow.

And starting in the 1990s, historians of conservatism showed a vibrant right, buckling against the liberal tradition. Kim Phillips-Fein has examined the network of business leaders who directed the mobilization against the New Deal and its legacy. Thomas Sugrue captured the dynamics of the Northern white backlash in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Rick Perlstein's *Before the Storm* traced the evolution of the right from the activists who elevated Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater to the top of the Republican ticket in 1964 to *Nixonland* and *Reaganland*. Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* deals with the political power of places such as Orange County, California, while Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino focus on Republican appeals to suburban voters just outside cities like Charlotte and Jackson.

Yet these new studies of the right mostly left intact the idea that liberalism was the dominant tradition in the United States; they just set out to document how the right fought against it. They primarily wrote about how a grassroots modern conservative movement in the 1970s and 1980s, sometimes earlier, finally broke the hold of the liberal consensus—after the New Left had already shaken it up as a result of Vietnam—and pushed the nation rightward. In his new book, *Illiberal America*, Hahn aims to tell a different kind of story: one in which illiberalism is not a backlash but a central feature from the founding to today, and in which reaction is an ever-present mode of American political activity.

Illiberal America: A History
by Steven Hahn
W.W. Norton & Company, 464 pp., $35.00

HAHN'S POINT IS not to dismiss liberalism, which he characterizes as an ideology that imagines "rights-bearing individuals," "civic inclusiveness," "representative institutions of governance," "the rule of law and equal standing before it," democratic "methods of representation," and the "mediation of power" through "civil and political devices." His intention, he writes, is to unpack the "shaky foundations on which liberal principles often rested" and "the ability of some social groups to use those principles to define their own communities while refusing it to others."

Hahn defines illiberalism as being founded, like its liberal adversary, on a key set of principles. Illiberalism emphasizes a "suspicion of outsiders" to the community that justifies the "quick resort to expulsion." In this tradition, the needs of the community triumph over the individual, and rights are limited to both local geographic spaces and a small number of actions. "Cultural homogeneity" is prized over pluralism and difference, and "enforced coercively." Illiberal politics demand resistance to some forms of authority—especially to state functions like taxation and regulation—while submitting to others, including religion.

To puncture the architecture of Louis Hartz's argument, Hahn begins the book by rejecting the assertion that the nation was born without a feudal tradition and was always moving in the direction of enlightened belief. The colonists, Hahn suggests, clearly expressed "neo-feudal" ambitions. He points to the harshness of indentured servitude in the Colonies: In the mid–eighteenth century, most Europeans in the American Colonial countryside were "tenants, laborers, and servants as they lived in states of dependency (wives and children) in the households of property owners." Between 20 and 30 percent of the workforce in the Virginia and Maryland Colonies were indentured servants, treated as the property of their masters. Corporal punishment was a common way to control workers. The cost for trying to escape usually entailed whipping, lashings, and beatings. Few ever enjoyed the "freedom dues" that were promised when someone finished their contract, because the mortality rate was so high for servants as a result of disease and sheer exhaustion. Of course, the other forced labor pool available to wealthier whites were enslaved Africans who lived under brutal conditions and were stripped of their humanity. Hahn's disturbing origins story is not just a tale of a people who were "moving toward something more open, more tolerant and more liberally included," he writes, but also of a country shaped by "neo-feudal dreams, regimes of coerced labor, social hierarchies, and strong cultural and religious allegiances."

In the 1830s, the era of "Jacksonian Democracy," illiberalism inspired recurring bouts of white terrorism. Andrew Jackson made his name, Hahn reminds us, not just through the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 but with brutal assaults on the Seminole and Creek Nations, on fugitive slaves, and with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The 1830s witnessed ferocious assaults on Native Americans, Black Americans, Roman Catholics, and Mormons. This period, Hahn writes, saw "a political culture that thrived on sidearms, street gangs, truncheons, and fists as well as rallies, conventions, and grassroots mobilizations."

Hahn also emphasizes the intensity of the anti-abolitionist movement: Violence against abolitionist gatherings broke out in big cities like New York and Philadelphia as well as smaller towns such as Concord, New Hampshire. In October 1835, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was violently heaved with a rope through the streets of Boston by an angry pro-slavery mob. Opponents of freeing slaves burned down the

abolitionist meeting site at Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia in May 1838. These events, Hahn argues, were more than vigilante outbursts. "Although some of the rioters came from the lower reaches of the social order, looking to vent their hostilities and dissatisfactions, the leadership came chiefly from the ranks of merchants, bankers, lawyers, and public officials," many from established, influential families. The "idea of 'mobs' and 'riots,'" Hahn points out, "obscures what was really the persistence of older forms of political expression."

The atmosphere of illiberal violence even "suffused the halls of legislative power." Even though Ohio and Illinois outlawed slavery in 1802 and 1848, "Black Laws" curtailed the ability of freed Black men to vote and otherwise participate in civic life. And, building on the work of the historian Joanne Freeman, Hahn recounts how physical altercations became a regular part of democratic and legislative politics at the state and local level. The speaker of the Arkansas House stabbed a colleague to death following a verbal insult in 1837. In 1838, a Maryland congressman named William Graves killed Maine Representative Jonathan Cilley in a rifle duel near the Anacostia bridge in Washington, following accusations of bribery. And, most famously, in 1856 South Carolina's Preston Brooks pummeled Massachusetts's Charles Sumner into a bloody pulp on the floor of the United States Senate chamber.

While Hahn joins scholars who explain these clashes as manifestations of the hardening divide over slavery, he paints a broader portrait of a nation where brute force was an endemic element of an illiberal culture; where weapons, street gangs, and militias were a routine way of handling differences and maintaining control. "The arenas of formal electoral politics and of intimidation and expulsion were more interconnected than we might imagine," he writes.

Illiberalism repeatedly proved its capacity to survive bursts of support for social rights and pluralism. In the post–Civil War period, when the liberal commitment to social rights seemed to be gaining momentum with the end of slavery and the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, dark clouds hovered over Reconstruction. Republicans separated the end of slavery from the guarantee of freedom for African Americans. The convict lease system, founded in the 1840s, was vastly expanded during the Reconstruction period, and carceral repression chipped away at the potential for genuine liberation. Radical Republicans in Congress saw their agenda thwarted by Southern Democrats. The contested election of 1876 was settled when Democrats agreed for Rutherford Hayes instead of Samuel Tilden to become president in exchange for ending Reconstruction. When Jim Crow laws were imposed in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the promise of racial justice ended. In 1921, white mobs destroyed the vibrant Black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The lines between liberalism and illiberalism were not always easy to discern. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, illiberalism attached itself to a political movement that was theoretically committed to ameliorating social inequities. The ideas born out of the neofeudal past were woven into a Progressive reform movement that promised to guide the United States in its transition into the modern era of industrialization and urbanization. While the Progressive era cast expertise and bureaucratization as the means to a more rational and prosperous future, it also produced social engineering, eugenics, and Theodore Roosevelt's justifications for imperialism.

It wasn't much of a surprise that Mussolini was admired in many quarters of this so-called liberal nation. By the mid-1920s, the mainstream American press was publishing favorable stories about Il Duce. The American Legion lionized the Italian leader, inviting him to speak at its annual convention in 1923 (he declined). Mussolini, Hahn explains, likewise admired the United States, citing some of the nation's great authors, such as Emerson and Twain, as inspirations. Adolf Hitler also drew on the United States, from the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s to the Jim Crow system in the South, in crafting his regime. All of this was not hard to do. There was plenty of good, old-fashioned American illiberalism that they could tap into as they constructed brutal, fascist governments in Italy and Germany. As scholars such as Stefan Kühl and James Q. Whitman have documented in their books *The Nazi Connection* and *Hitler's American Model*, German and American eugenic thinkers with ties to the burgeoning university system shared ideas and funding to promote a science of discrimination and, ultimately, genocide.

Even in the heyday of liberalism and of its left-wing critics in the Age of Aquarius, powerful elected officials embraced illiberalism with gusto. Alabama Governor George Wallace, who ran in 1968 as a third-party candidate for president, embodied the rising forces of postwar reaction. The ultimate practitioner of "grievance politics," Wallace stitched together a campaign on the far-right American Independent Party ticket, gaining traction through opposition to the civil rights revolution. Whereas a decade ago Wallace's 1964 and 1968 campaigns were treated by historians as ugly sidebars to the main contests (Goldwater versus LBJ and Humphrey versus Nixon), Hahn brings together the recent literature that has shown how the governor's racist, reactionary, populist, and often violent appeal tapped into a deep seam that ran throughout working- and middle-class America—from Selma to Detroit. Wallace's defeat at the ballot box in 1968 should not be confused with a defeat for the ideas he represented. Though on its own Hahn's argument is not earth-shattering, in the context of the long history of illiberalism, we can see that in many ways it was Wallace rather than his competitors who, as Hahn puts it, "anticipated the country's political direction" and defined the tenor of conservative politics for decades to come.

Nor was the postwar university immune from illiberal forces. Less famous than the leftist Students for a Democratic Society, though no less influential, was Young Americans for Freedom. Created in 1960, the organization proclaimed to stand against the power of the state and the threat of communism. YAF's Sharon Statement touted individual freedom, law and order, and federalism. YAF had chapters on campuses all over the country by the time that Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968. The student organization became a starting place for some of the most important conservative figures of the 1970s, such as Pat Buchanan, Richard Viguerie, and Terry Dolan.

Given illiberalism's deep roots in our political culture, the first few decades of the twenty-first century should not have come as a surprise. When Tea Party activists challenged the legitimacy of the first Black American president and conservative media hosts entertained the "great replacement theory," they were tapping into some of our oldest national values—though not the ones we like to talk about. Illiberalism was never fringe, as Louis Hartz's generation believed it to be. Rather, illiberalism inspired law and elected officials, built political movements, and spawned mob action.

SEVENTY-SIX YEARS SINCE Richard Hofstadter published *The American Political Tradition, Illiberal America* mostly succeeds in showing the persistence of reaction, if not its dominance.

What Hahn, and the voluminous scholarship on which his book is built, make clear is that the notion of an inevitable liberal "consensus" that grew organically out of the nation's founding was wrong. New Hahn, as well as old Hahn, have demonstrated clearly that modern liberalism had to survive in a fraught political culture, one where liberal values were hard to secure and often barely survived. Our national history has been much more layered and complex than Hofstadter's generation understood. There has been no "American Political Tradition." There are multiple traditions, each with strong roots in the polity.

Still, the fact that liberalism has been fiercely contested doesn't mean it has not exerted immense influence. From the Emancipation Proclamation to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, to FDR's New Deal policies in the 1930s, to LBJ's Great Society in the 1960s, to President Joe Biden's ambitious environmental programs since 2021, liberal ideas have thrived, and they have changed the United States.

More important, liberalism has been able to inscribe itself through enduring legislation (think Social Security and Medicare). It was funny but not a surprise that, when Tea Party activists protested President Barack Obama's health care proposal in 2010, which would have entailed spending cuts in existing programs, they held up placards that read KEEP GOVERNMENT OUT OF MY MEDICARE! Furthermore, grassroots movements from abolitionism, to unionism, to civil rights, to feminism and gay rights have been enormously successful in transforming liberal ideals that were initially dismissed as radical into conventional wisdom. Same-sex marriage now barely causes a stir, whereas back in 1977, orange juice spokeswoman Anita Bryant was able to whip up a storm against an ordinance in Dade County, Florida, that guaranteed civil rights for gay Americans.

And, unlike illiberal tenets, the ideas of liberalism have found much more success at becoming the avowed philosophy of mainstream political leaders. While a Democrat such as President Biden has no problem praising the value of a strong federal government and the protection of civil rights, Republicans until recently have relied on code words when they saw benefit in connecting themselves to illiberalism. As Thomas and Mary Edsall argued in their classic book from the 1990s, *Chain Reaction*, most leaders in the modern Republican Party relied on dog whistles. Their reluctance to directly invoke these kinds of ideas suggests that in many respects the pull of liberalism has remained stronger.

What Hahn's provocative synthesis should stimulate is a new look at liberalism itself. We must rethink how we understand the success of a President Franklin Roosevelt or Johnson, given the intensity of the obstacles that they faced. Programs such as Medicare must not be treated as the obvious alternative to bolder social democratic options, or nothing, but as the product of grassroots activists, interest groups, and nonprofits, as well as elected officials. This was the story of the 2020 election, which Biden's campaign—running on the liberal principles of the rule of law and the importance of democracy—won on the shoulders of everyone who had started to mobilize four years earlier.

As we approach the 2024 election, the potent role of illiberalism in our politics has never been clearer. And, as Hahn demonstrates, upholding liberal values will require, as it long has, a serious and sustained fight. TNR

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The Crisis

by D. Nurkse

Each must act for his or her own reasons. The wind
falters at nightfall but there's fury in dry leaves.

Vehemence of a dream no one can remember
leaches into statistics. Flora will leave for France.
Jill stays indoors and won't answer texts or email.
Henry oils a Glock. Duane calls Jesus. Father gulps a red pill.

With a clipboard we halt passersby, but the enemy
parrots our warning word for word—"our country
is disappearing, just a few days to save it, a handful
of corrupt rich men, a few who care enough to act"—

"The crisis began when I was born," "it will end tomorrow,"
"I have no idea who I am," "we're racing into the past"—

We locked down and made love on the bare mattress.
Our freshly painted signs were drying and the room stank.

The Enola Gay left Tinian. The NKVD entered Katyn.

Once the door opened wide but no one stood in the doorway.

No one but the sky? No, no one, not even the evening star.

The cat crouched under the credenza staring.
It was long ago. We were lovers. Our silence was a wall.

D. Nurkse *is the author of 12 poetry collections, most recently* A Country of Strangers.

The Universalist

The enduring power of Keith Haring's "art for everybody"

By Jeremy Lybarger

KEITH HARING IS to art what "Happy Birthday" is to the American songbook: a standard whose ubiquity hasn't quite dulled its ritual magic. Since his death in 1990, Haring's iconography—radiant crawling babies, barking dogs, three-eyed faces, rubbery bodies that are busily alive—has colonized vast swaths of cultural real estate. Has the work of any recent American artist been so relentlessly hawked? Haring is practically a public utility at this point. There are Haring mugs, T-shirts, sneakers, and tote bags; Haring bathrobes, rugs, pillows, and prayer candles; Haring playing cards, chess sets, yo-yos, and ice cream flavors. (The inventory includes curiosities such as sex toys and dog chews.) "The greatest thing is to come up with something so good it seems as if it's always been there, like a proverb," the poet Rene Ricard wrote of Haring. The next greatest thing is to come up with something so universal it can be sold anywhere.

In *Radiant: The Life and Line of Keith Haring,* Brad Gooch delivers not only a biography of the artist but a globe-trotting account of how Haring's pictograms flooded the zeitgeist. These stories are inseparable but distinct. I must confess: Haring the protagonist isn't all that fascinating. Likable, yes, but nice guys make for dull company. When contrasted with Andy Warhol (neurotic, bewigged) or Jean-Michel Basquiat (enigmatic, doomed), Haring comes off as pleasantly mild. Aside from a few middling contretemps with his lovers, he was mostly drama-free: a congenial, earnest, and hardworking man. He adored children. He liked dancing on Saturday nights. Sex was his sport.

Haring's art is a different matter. Even when he was alive, his work had its own virality. In 1980, he began what Gooch calls "one of the largest public art projects ever conceived": more than 5,000 chalk drawings hurriedly improvised on blank advertising panels throughout the New York City subway system. This graffiti—fugitive glyphs from the political and psychic doomsday aboveground—made Haring a local cause célèbre. ("He received nearly one hundred summonses during the entirety of the subway project, but also a few arrests," Gooch writes.) The drawings jump-started his fame, and for the next decade Haring was the wunderkind of a new sensibility that distilled hip-hop, advertising, fashion, and nightlife into highly marketable commodities.

The critic Vivien Raynor described Haring as "an artist nobody doesn't love." And Haring's own credo was to make "art for everybody," which was both an aesthetic and commercial imperative. In 1986, he opened the Pop Shop in SoHo, selling branded merchandise in a savvily art-directed environment that mimicked a fast-food drive-through. (A second, short-lived outpost opened in Tokyo two years later.) Haring described the venture as an "extended performance," and, in fact, his whole career fits under that umbrella in a way only Warhol rivals. The subway drawings were as much a public ceremony as an art intervention; their evanescence was part of what made them talismanic riddles. Haring's friend, the photographer Tseng Kwong Chi, shuttled around the subterranean city documenting the works before they vanished, as if they were already relics.

Haring was reluctant to decipher his own symbolism. His statements often consisted of canned populist rhetoric ("art for everybody") or vaguely woo-woo sentiment (he referred to his images as "primitive code," akin to automatic writing). Because his personal life was largely stable—Haring had neither the fatal dependencies of Basquiat nor the harrowing childhood of David Wojnarowicz, for example—the complexities of his bio aren't so much psychological as vocational. *Radiant* is really the story of a career, of one artist's entanglement with the market. Haring made no masterpieces per se, only a repertoire of communicable figures and stylistic trademarks. If you want to understand why that repertoire electrified viewers and emptied wallets in the 1980s, and why it continues to do so at a gallop, you won't necessarily find the answer in a book about Haring's day-to-day life. He was right when he called himself just a "middleman" for his work. He needed his art more than it ever needed him.

ASIDE FROM A brief religious infatuation and victimless teenage rebellion, Haring's early years were boilerplate. Born in 1958, he grew up in small-town Pennsylvania, the oldest of four children whose first names all began with K. His father, an electronics technician and amateur cartoonist, introduced him to Dr. Seuss and Walt Disney. Haring was already obsessed with drawing by the time he entered kindergarten. TV was another constant: cartoons, sitcoms, and *The Monkees* were his mainstays. In 1972, 14-year-old Haring joined the Jesus movement after hearing a "tall Black man" espouse the virtues of personal salvation at a March of Dimes walkathon. This evangelical honeymoon lasted about a year and primarily consisted of Haring plastering fluorescent "One Way" stickers—the calling

Radiant: The Life and Line of Keith Haring
by Brad Gooch
Harper,
512 pp., $40.00

Keith Haring in his studio in New York, 1988

PHOTO: TSENG KWONG CHI/MUNA TSENG DANCE PROJECTS INC; ART: © KEITH HARING FOUNDATION

card of Christ's suburban publicists—all over town. He also doodled religious symbols in a foretaste of the crucifixions and irradiated crosses that haunt his later work.

In a reversal of the usual order, Haring found drugs after religion. First came marijuana, and then a bedroom diet of quaaludes, barbiturates, speed, and PCP. A rendezvous with LSD when he was 15 or 16 induced a creative breakthrough: "I started doing stream-of-consciousness drawing and shapes melting one into another." Haring trumpeted an acidhead philosophy in which chance plays an outsize role in life and art; in interviews a few years later, he paraphrased Louis Pasteur's paradoxical aphorism, "chance favors the prepared mind." For the rest of his life, Haring drew or painted freestyle, and almost never made preparatory sketches, even when embarking on jumbo public murals. The occult coherence of the line was his new faith.

After high school came a period of expeditions both literal and existential: art school in Pittsburgh, cross-country travels, Grateful Dead groupiedom, stilted relationships with girls, stifled crushes on boys. Haring discovered the work of Jean Dubuffet, whose deliberately crude figuration and vehement endorsement of untrained and institutionalized artists were touchstones. He read *The Art Spirit,* the 1923 treatise by painter Robert Henri, which declared art "the province of every human being"—an idea Haring finessed into his own anti-materialist ethos. Likewise, the Belgian painter Pierre Alechinsky was a revelation, with his impulsive line work and gestural fluidity. After seeing

Haring's images call to us because they're legible despite their mysteries, and somehow joyful, even when we don't know the meaning of that joy.

an Alechinsky exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 1977, Haring resolved to ditch Pittsburgh and make his fortune in what he called "the center of the world."

NO BIOGRAPHY REALLY begins until its subject moves to New York. Gooch sketches a city that was sweltering and bombed-out, Technicolored with graffiti. Haring saw traces of the artists he admired in this rogue street language with its cartoonish forms and bulbous lettering. He saw, too, hints of Japanese and Chinese calligraphy. The downtown poetry scene became another novel intoxicant; William S. Burroughs's cutup technique and fractured language excited Haring.

But art always came first. Haring curated shows at Club 57, a basement nightspot in the East Village. Among his exhibitions were works by anonymous makers and one of erotic art. "Some of the most interesting, most inspiring and influential art I have seen in the last two years in New York City has been on the street," he wrote, heeding the example of Dubuffet's egalitarian eye. "Many of these things remain untouched, undocumented, perhaps un-noticed."

What was being noticed was the emerging art scene on the Lower East Side. Some of the most vivid writing about Haring's work comes not from Gooch (whose prose follows the neutral tone of most contemporary biography) but from the critics he cites. William Zimmer of the *SoHo Weekly News* apprehended the tension underlying many of Haring's scenes, a kind of combustive energy that's simultaneously panicked and jubilant:

> The human figures on his posters, based on the international symbols employed in airports, do unspeakable things. But because they are faceless, near-automatons, their functions don't seem to arise from their own desires. One rutting couple might claim, "UFOs made us do it." Along with the humans are dolphins, our would-be boon companions and rivals in intelligence. Haring provokes the question: what is willed and what is reflex?

Elsewhere, the actress Ann Magnuson recalls what it was like to encounter Haring's "personalized petroglyphs that spelled relief from the piss-soaked wreckage of the Lower East Side." Gooch recounts the giddiness of Haring's subway era when the artist "often finished thirty or forty [drawings] in a three-hour shift, with no possibility of revising, as erasing created a cloud of a smudge." Haring debuted several signature motifs, including flying saucers (perhaps a nod to having recently seen *Forbidden Planet*), figures with holes gored through their stomachs, and teased snakes. Once, when Haring was drawing the latter on the Grand Central Station platform, a bystander rushed over to exclaim, "I hear ya. We're all getting swallowed up by some fuckin' snake!"

As Haring's star ascended, so did his romantic life. He fell in love with Juan Dubose, a Black deejay he met at a bathhouse. "He's totally butch and it's the best sex I ever had," Haring said. The couple set up house together and became fixtures at Paradise Garage, a dance club in the West Village that catered to Black and Hispanic patrons. One clubgoer remembers a dance floor so sweat-slicked it had to be dusted with baby powder. Music was the lingua franca at the Garage; the video for Madonna's "Everybody" was filmed there in 1982, just before she became indomitable. Ingrid Sischy, then editor of *Artforum,* likened Haring's discovery of the club to Gauguin landing in Tahiti.

Around that time, Haring also began collaborating with Angel Ortiz, a 14-year-old Puerto Rican boy better known by his graffiti tag LA II. "I'm sure inside I'm not white," Haring confided in his journal. His relationship to nonwhite culture was sincere, but tinged by inevitable hierarchies and imperceptions. While many of his works promulgated activist messages—he denounced apartheid in South Africa and painted a visceral commemoration of Michael Stewart, a Black street artist who died after being brutalized by police in 1983—Haring sometimes indulged an appropriative impulse. (*Keith Haring's Line: Race and the Performance of Desire,* by the scholar Ricardo Montez, examines these dynamics in a more rigorous, albeit academic, way than Gooch's book does.) In 1984, a Haring mural in Melbourne, Australia, was vandalized after critics accused the artist of pilfering aboriginal imagery. "I didn't even know what Aboriginal art was," Haring said in self-defense.

Bill T. Jones, the Black choreographer whose nude body Haring famously painted in 1983, noted that Haring "loves people from a class lower than his own" but seemed incapable of meeting the emotional demands of such a disparity. Haring and Dubose separated in 1985, partly because Dubose was using heroin and cocaine. He'd "lost his soul somehow," a friend said, and was just "Mrs. Keith Haring." In short order, Haring found solace in Juan Rivera, a 28-year-old Puerto Rican man ("a walking sex object," per Haring) who worked odd jobs. Their relationship burned out in 1988, when Haring pursued his final and most unlikely conquest: a straight, 19-year-old Puerto Rican deejay named Gil Vazquez. The couple jetted around Europe in a sexless romance that puzzled some of Haring's friends, and will likely puzzle many readers.

BY THE MID-'80S, Haring's productivity was in overdrive. He signed with Tony Shafrazi, a gallery owner whose maverick reputation included spray-painting KILL LIES ALL across Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974—a stunt for which he was arrested. Haring was "a perfectionist as far as his career went," according to another onetime agent, and deeply enamored of fame. "It has been moving so quickly that the only record is airplane tickets and articles in magazines from the

T-shirts printed with Haring's art in the window of a Gap Kids store in Manhattan, 2015

ROBERT ALEXANDER/GETTY IMAGES

various trips and exhibitions," Haring wrote in his journal in 1986. "Someday I suppose these will constitute my biography." The more hectic Haring's career becomes, the more Gooch's book hyperventilates into glorified itinerary—a haze of trans-Atlantic flights, luxury hotels, big commissions, and famous names. Among the most notable is Warhol, with whom Haring maintained a reverential friendship and, at least from Warhol's side, a kind of muffled envy. After attending the closing of a Haring exhibition in 1984, Warhol lamented in his diary: "... I got jealous. This Keith thing reminded me of the old days when I was up there."

Warhol's most enduring lesson for Haring was the concept of business art. "During the hippie era people put down the idea of business," Warhol wrote. "They'd say 'Money is bad' and 'Working is bad,' but making money is art, and working is art—and good business is the best art." Haring's Pop Shop literalized Warhol's philosophy while also further tarnishing his reputation among critics who weren't favorable anyway. "Maybe if he had been able to open a shop from the start, we wouldn't have had to deal with him as an artist," Hilton Kramer groused. The confluence of capitalist mass production and the rarefied preciousness of art disturbed many old-guard tastemakers. It also alienated some of Haring's fellow street artists. In 1983, a Haring mural in the East Village was defaced with graffiti reading BIG CUTE SHIT and 9,999, a reference to Haring having told *The Village Voice* that he'd cap his prices at $10,000.

Haring's legacy remains as much about branding and economics as art. When the *Financial Times* asked last year, "HAVE WE REACHED PEAK KEITH HARING?," the question missed the point of Haring's retail saturation: The peak is the whole shebang. Pervasiveness is proof of concept. Art is for everyone.

"I WENT OVER to the East River on the Lower East Side and just cried and cried and cried," Haring wrote after he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988. The art he made during his final two years includes some of his most provocative and renowned works, such as *Once Upon a Time,* the orgiastic black enamel mural in the men's room of what is now The Center in the West Village. Gooch describes its "entangled penises, cum shots, and avid, flicking tongues" as a "sex-positive paean to a golden age of promiscuity." Haring also created vibrant agitprop for ACT UP. In 1989, he printed 20,000 copies of his poster *Ignorance = Fear,* which featured a trio of faceless yellow figures pantomiming see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Privately, Haring admitted, "I really want to ... try to heal myself by painting. I think I could actually do it." He died in the early morning hours of February 16, 1990.

Haring has now been dead longer than he was alive. What can we say of him more than 30 years later? Gooch's book offers private marginalia: Haring was a lifelong list-maker; white Casablanca lilies were among his favorite flowers; he requested that his final bedroom look like a "whorehouse." But about Haring's art, inscrutability still prevails. His work came quickly, instinctively, discharged from whatever collective unconscious he channeled. His images call to us because they're legible despite their mysteries, and somehow joyful, even when we don't know the meaning of that joy or understand its costs. His figures, too, are anonymous but specific in ways we all recognize: Here is heartache; here is life. Haring conveys the vulgarity of simply being in the presence of effervescent art—that desire to gorge, to stare. And he knew his own power. "I am making things in the world that won't go away when I do," he wrote. "But now I know, as I am making these things, that they are 'real' things, maybe more 'real' than me, because they will stay here when I go." TNR

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Slow Burn

Shōgun is reinventing the TV epic.

By Phillip Maciak

LAST FALL, I made a classroom full of 20-year-olds read *The Da Vinci Code*. It was a seminar for junior American culture studies majors, and one of the themes was to focus on cultural texts from the year 2003, the year when most of them were born. We read *The Da Vinci Code* because it was the bestselling book of that year, it provoked months of controversy and obsession, and it was spun off into a series of blockbuster movies. It was a big deal! As the novel was quite literally "before their time," I doubted they would have read it already, but I assumed there'd be some degree of familiarity. (One assignment was that they had to take the book home over Thanksgiving break, read it conspicuously in front of any millennial or Gen X people in their lives, and report back.) Turns out, barely any of the students in my class had even heard of it.

People, in other words, forget things fast. For that reason, I don't suspect any of my students have heard of James Clavell's 1975 historical novel *Shōgun* either. *Shōgun,* which has just been adapted as an epic limited series by FX, was also a massive bestseller, which ignited a tremendous popular interest in its subject, and was adapted into an extremely successful miniseries. Depending on your age, perhaps you read *Shōgun* in the 1970s, perhaps you saw your parents read it or watched the Richard Chamberlain/Toshiro Mifune miniseries in the 1980s, or, perhaps, like me, you grew up in a world where every home bookshelf you saw came with an obligatory, brick-like copy of Clavell's 1,200-page novel as its cornerstone. I never read *Shōgun*, but it was a recognizable, ubiquitous cultural object throughout most of my adolescence.

This is all to say that, even for people who read the novel at the height of its popularity nearly 50 years ago or simply remember that half-unsheathed katana hilt book cover as an iconic image of their youths, the new miniseries adaptation bears very little burden of expectation from its viewers in 2024. Clavell's novel, while popular, is not compulsory reading anymore, and while the miniseries was critically lauded in its time, it isn't available to stream on any platform. (An article from this year suggests the easiest way to see the 1980 series is to find a copy at a local library.) This slow fade makes the new *Shōgun* the rare adaptation that can operate relatively free from demands for fidelity that often trouble a new series.

Developed by FX over a period of 10 years and helmed since 2018 by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks, this *Shōgun* can and does stand fully on its own. It won't rival the novel for its popularity, and it's simply impossible for any TV show in our current subscription-based, streaming moment to access the kind of audience the 1980 miniseries did, but *Shōgun* is a colossal achievement all the same. It provides the kind of transporting saga that TV executives have been desperately thirsting after for the past decade, but its style is a slow burn rather than a series of sensational pyrotechnics. If the Peak TV limited series relied on stars and spectacle and easy familiarity, *Shōgun* asks us to become a different type of spectator, more patient, less distractable. In this way, it is a defining event of the post–Peak TV era.

***SHŌGUN* BEGINS IN** the lurching and keeling bowels of a rotting pirate ship, and it begins in English. It's a bit of a feint, as the pirate Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis) is soon captured by a unit of Japanese soldiers, and most of the rest of this audaciously expansive epic will take place within the meticulously clean, angular, minimalist interiors and courtyards of feudal Japan. It will also proceed, largely, in Japanese with English subtitles. Blackthorne, who is soon renamed Anjin, or "Pilot," by his captors, is this show's window into the action, but it's not long before even he realizes that he is not the protagonist of this particular tale. He arrives in Japan ranting about its "savages," aghast at their apparent cruelty, only to realize his prejudices and petty schemes won't get him far in this new setting, that there are plot machinations at work that he's not equipped yet to perceive.

Rather than setting things in motion, then, it soon becomes clear that Blackthorne has arrived in the middle of the show's main intrigue. The Taikō, or supreme regent of Japan, has just died, but, because his son and heir is too young to assume power, the realm has been left in the hands of a council of five daimyo regents. Four of these

KATIE YU/FX

regents operate as a bickering alliance, led by Ishido Kazunari (Takehiro Hira) out of Osaka castle, and they've aligned largely to ostracize and consolidate power against the fifth regent, Yoshii Toranaga (the magisterial Hiroyuki Sanada), who was the Taikō's favorite and also the most powerful of the council. When Blackthorne's ship washes up in the bay, the council is in the process of its attempt to impeach Toranaga, an action that would, ultimately, lead to him and his entire retinue being sentenced to death. Blackthorne's arrival matters less because of Blackthorne himself than it does because it briefly destabilizes the status quo, creating a small amount of chaos that Toranaga can use to his advantage.

Blackthorne, then, is a pawn, as are most of the other characters we meet, whether they know it or not, and whether they view it as an honor or a curse. His opposite number is Lady Mariko (an incredible Anna Sawai), the daughter of a disgraced lord. Because she's been tutored (and converted) by the Jesuits, she speaks excellent Portuguese, and Toranaga enlists her to translate for Blackthorne, who has picked up the language on his travels. That Mariko and Blackthorne strike up a forbidden infatuation is easy to guess, though it might be frustrating to some viewers that their romance never ascends to the status of a love story in this series. Both of these characters have roles to play in the interlocking, often obscured schemes Toranaga sets in motion to oppose and defeat his enemies on the council. Their entanglement instead merely further complicates the way they read and are read in the process.

One of the main features of this show—and the source of its most important narrative innovation—is how rigorously rule-bound its characters are. It can make certain actions or choices (even fatal ones) seem cruelly or vexingly unnecessary, but it also forces the viewer to accept a kind of patience that's unusual in contemporary TV. Many of Toranaga's initial gambits, for instance, are bureaucratic ones. His enemies are bloodthirsty, but they are limited by the processes of law, so Toranaga jams the works. If the council votes on his impeachment, he's dead, so Toranaga schemes to prevent the vote. He uses the "heretic" Blackthorne's mere presence to split the council, two of whom are converted Christians. He resigns in order to force Ishido to figure out a way to replace him before the vote. At one point, seated in front of his enemies on the council, Toranaga seethes, "these meetings are exhausting," but it is precisely his skillful manipulation of the council's bureaucracy that saves him. There are traitors and true believers, nested lies and cantilevered deceptions, brutal executions and honor-bound suicides, but these all transpire within an inviolable set of rules, regulations, and intricately observed customs. There is always a process.

Yabushige (Tadanobu Asano), one of Toranaga's allies who is constantly trying to sell out his lord for his own survival, exists in the show as a kind of aberration. He's the sort of open schemer, braggart, and sadist who would have done well in a different world, say that of *Game of Thrones,* but here, he's too coarse and crudely calculated to be effective. Even at the level of acting style, Asano's vulgar, charismatic Yabushige puts Sanada's crafty, composed Toranaga in relief.

It might seem that a show built around a series of complex, mostly hidden Rube Goldberg plot mechanics would be dramatically inert, but the opposite is true. We learn to pay closer and closer attention, never knowing which spectacular act of violence, which heartbreaking betrayal, which fleeting glance might signal that the plan has snapped into place. *Shōgun* is not just a voluptuously mounted historical epic, it's a daring experiment in the kind of narrative we can immerse ourselves in.

TO SAY THAT *Shōgun* is a defining moment is not to say it's a wholly representative one. Peak TV got its name from FX executive John Landgraf in 2015, describing an environment in which traditional networks and streamers were engaged in a bloated arms race that was producing far more content—and far more mediocre content—than a single human being could ever watch. A big part of this glut has consisted of poorly conceived and poorly manufactured epics. Premium cable networks and streamers have been trying—and largely failing—to make giant, expensive event series ever since *Game of Thrones* went nuclear. The problem is that such series are not only hard to pick (why did *Outlander* work, for instance, but not *Foundation* or *The Wheel of Time*?), they're also incredibly hard to make. Amazon paid nearly a billion dollars to launch *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (including a full quarter-billion for rights), a prequel to one of the most universally beloved film franchises of all time, and less than half of viewers could even bring themselves to finish watching the first season. Big-budget epics have been a constant object of desire for streaming and network executives for the better part of a decade, but their success has been rare and hard to predict. TV, for the past decade, has been in out-of-control copycat mode, and the returns have been diminishing.

Landgraf recently announced that, after a little over eight years, TV production is finally declining. Peak TV, then, has ended, spiritually and statistically. The number of scripted series is down 14 percent since 2022, and streamers have begun to focus on profits rather than subscriber numbers or average revenue per user. That has meant fewer shows in production, fewer bags of money thrown at possible high-risk game changers, fewer bites at the proverbial apple.

Shōgun began its development at the beginning of Peak TV and is finally premiering now at its end. It is the tortoise that has outlasted the hare. Almost by definition, the shows that explode our expectations, that define their times, are the shows that defy the conventions of their moment. *Shōgun* might not look like a radical break, but it is: *Shōgun* revels in the high production values, epic scope, and prestige pedigree so valued by the past decade of television, but it also doubles down on its own distinctiveness. This is not an attempt to make a "new" *Game of Thrones* or a "new" *Mad Men* or even a "new" *Shōgun*. It sets its own rules, it plays by them, and it expects its audience to comply.

We are no longer in television's Gilded Age of excess; *Shōgun* heralds a new age, which may be defined by this show's patience and skill or may be crowded with its wan imitators. Kondo, Marks, and even the prophet Landgraf himself have offered up a new vision. Will *Shōgun* change the landscape or merely serve as a fleeting glimpse of an alternate future? To this question, we may offer only another question, posed by Yabushige: Why tell a dead man the future? TNR

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Res Publica
by Jack McCordick

Can We Become a Country of "Joiners"?

A new documentary explores Robert Putnam's life and work.

At the turn of the century, the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, a data-heavy book about the collapse of civic participation in the United States—exemplified by the decline of participation in bowling leagues—and its baleful consequences for American democracy. Now, nearly a quarter-century after the publication of Putnam's landmark book, and with many of the trends he identified showing no signs of abating, I spoke to Rebecca and Pete Davis, co-directors of *Join or Die*, a new documentary on Putnam's life and work, which argues that the fate of democracy hinges on our becoming a country of "joiners" once again.

How did you become interested in Putnam's work?

PETE DAVIS: I'm a former student of Bob's and took his Community in America class. Most of the political science classes I was taking at the time focused on centralized power: We learned about the president, Congress, various legislative models, national elections, constitutions, international diplomacy—the political world seen from the top down. What was so special about Bob's class was that he called us to pay attention to something very different: ordinary neighborhood connections, associations, and movements—the political world seen from the ground up.

Meanwhile, as a news producer at NBC, my sister Rebecca was reporting on many symptoms of the civic decline Bob documented in *Bowling Alone*—from school shootings and veteran suicides to the housing crisis and towns being ripped apart by political polarization. And she was feeling called to tell a larger story that struck at the root of these symptoms.

Why is the formation of local clubs and civic associations so central to the story of American democracy?

REBECCA DAVIS: Behind the popular stories of individual heroes, revolutionary moments, and sweeping trends, you can always find associations. The movements we celebrate—abolition, civil rights, suffrage, gay rights, even the American independence movement itself—were constituted of various associations, clubs, unions, congregations, leagues, assemblies, congresses, and conventions where ordinary Americans met routinely. Many major technical innovations started in hobbyist and cooperative associations. Mutual aid societies and congregations are part of the story of every immigration wave in American history.

We also talk about how clubs are the place where people learn civic skills. It's associations where we practice how to run a meeting, give a speech, plan an event, organize a protest, resolve tensions, recruit collaborators, spread ideas, build bridges, and gather and wield power.

There have been many explanations for the broad atomizing trends Putnam observed in *Bowling Alone*. Which do you find most convincing?

PETE DAVIS: There is not one clear answer. However, in *Bowling Alone*, Bob found two interesting clues. First, he found a good amount of evidence that the popularization of television was a significant factor—the timing lines up, and there are many studies hinting that watching television replaced social and civic activity in our weekly schedules. (You can imagine how this might translate to other screens we're spending time in front of more recently!) More profoundly, Bob found really strong evidence that the civic decline was generational. The same people who were civic 50 years ago in their thirties are still civic today in their eighties—it's their kids who are less civic than their parents, and their kids' kids are, in turn, even less civic than they are. So something must have gone on in the generational transfer of civic habits.

However, both we and Bob think these are just hints—and that there is a much bigger story than "television and 'kids these days' killed civic life." The best metaphor for what I think happened is the idea of an "unraveling," where one trend fed another trend which fed another trend, and you wake up 50 years later and the fabric is gone.

How has the rise of social media and digital life more broadly affected the developments Putnam observed in the book? Have things gotten more bleak?

REBECCA DAVIS: *Bowling Alone* came out in 2000, years before the rise of smartphones and social media, so at the time Bob could only speculate on their effect. But that does tell us that it's not the case that things like iPhones and Facebook *caused the decline*. Rather, the question is: Did they exacerbate the decline, and, interestingly, did the fact that these technologies were designed during an age of civic decline affect how they were designed? And in turn: What would more pro-social and pro-civic technology look like?

What are things politicians and legislators can do to help make the United States into a country of "joiners" again?

PETE DAVIS: They can promote economic policies that give Americans the time and space to participate in community life—for example, fair scheduling laws that push back against chaotic work schedules; leave policies that create time for care work; and shortened workweeks and increased holidays (with no loss in pay) that create more time for communal activities.

I also think politicians can help redirect some of our attention and energy away from the palace intrigue of Washington politics and toward civic work in our own neighborhoods. We have been inspired by Senator Chris Murphy's efforts to call attention to our loneliness crisis. Politicians ask us to vote every four years, but we need more encouragement to perform another, perhaps more significant, four-letter action for our democracy: Join!

That's why this year we are taking the film on a community tour across the country—our Join Up! Tour 2024. Until it opens in theaters on July 19, the only way to see the film for now is, appropriately, together—by hosting a community screening, which you can book at Host.JoinOrDie.Film. TNR

Jack McCordick *is a reporter-researcher at* The New Republic.

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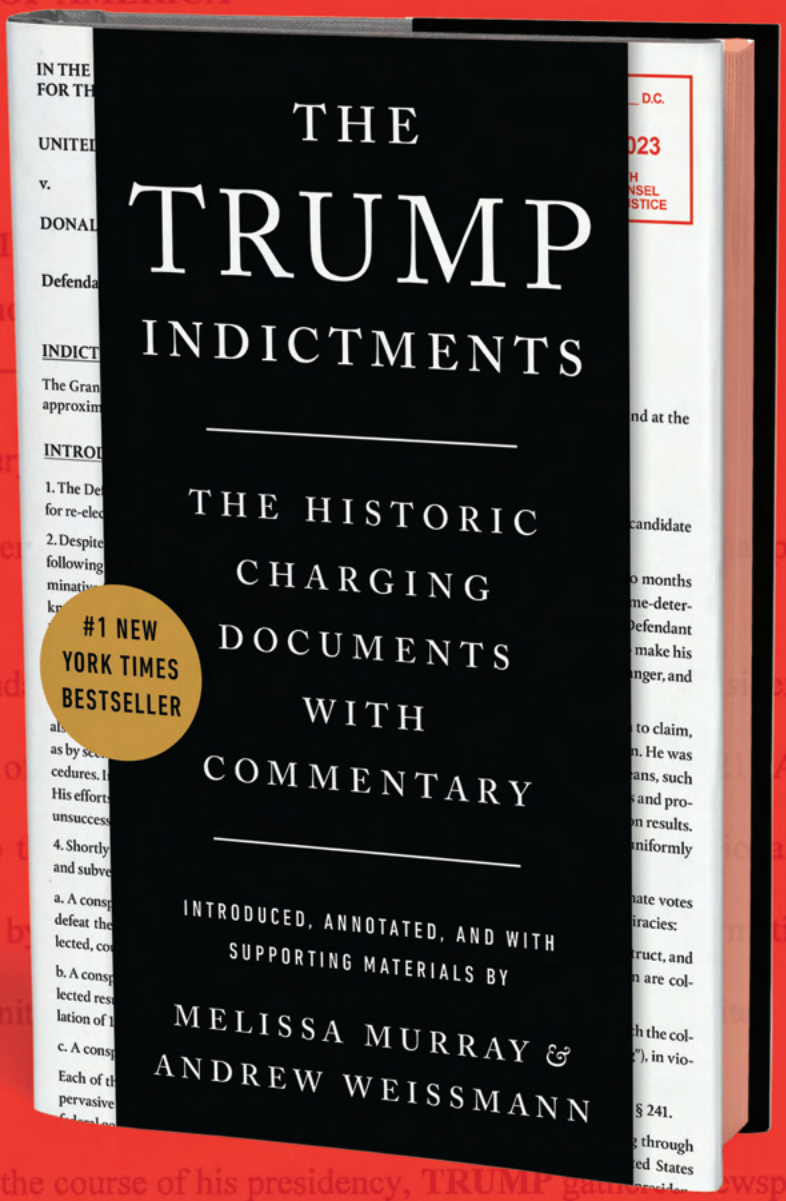

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