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SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

HOW BIG WIRELESS MADE US THINK THAT CELL PHONES ARE SAFE
Enlighten Us!

Steven Pinker’s book *Enlightenment Now* is making a case for optimism, not offering a balanced analysis of what’s wrong with Western culture. David A. Bell’s review [“The PowerPoint Philosophe,” April 2] misses the mark.

Carl Erickson
Minneapolis

Thank you, David A. Bell, for this delightful (and wryly humorous) discussion of Pinker’s work. This is the kind of review I thoroughly enjoy, for while I may not agree with your critique of Pinker at all times (I personally loathe Nietzsche and Foucault and Derrida), your insightful observations and clear-sighted criticisms—complete with snarky but hilarious (and appropriate) comparisons between Pinker’s work, TED Talks, and Dan Brown’s *Origin*—gives me a clear picture of whether or not I should take a hiatus from my own PhD reading in order to see if this book will have any value for my political-philosophy students. Your review gives me the confidence to decide that I should not bother to reduce either the foil of Ayn Rand or the insight of Thomas Picketty in order to make room for Pinker. Thank you for doing the labor for me!

Robert Borneman

The Renewable Solution

What could *The Nation* have been thinking, publishing the letter by Jim Padden with its nuclear-power-cheering nonsense [“Never Mind Armageddon,” April 2]? It is one thing to present minority or opposition viewpoints. It is another entirely to publish misinformation.

Nuclear power is and always has been a corporate-welfare dinosaur. After being subsidized by the government for 60 years, it makes less economic sense than ever. Its radioactive waste, which no one wants and which has never been dealt with, lasts longer than human civilization has existed. Future Fukushimas and Chernobyls threaten. Yet Padden says that nuclear power’s problems are “solvable.” It’s time to get acquainted with the truth: Renewables, without subsidies, are now the cheapest source of new energy. Utility-scale solar generation increased 51 percent from 2016 to 2017. Wind increased 11 percent. Nuclear declined 1.5 percent.

Daniel Fleisher
Baltimore

Let Them Feel Our Fear

The only way we’ll ever have gun control is if firearms are allowed into the halls and offices and onto the floors of both houses of Congress [“How to Beat the BS,” March 19/26]. Only when those who have sworn to represent “We the People” are subject to the same threats as we the people will our safety weigh as heavily as the NRA’s contributions, which function as successful bribes.

Liane Ellison Norman
Pittsburgh

Comments drawn from our website

letters@thenation.com
Hawk at the Helm

With his choice of John Bolton as national-security adviser, Donald Trump has put the finishing touches on a war cabinet, having nominated the bellicose Mike Pompeo as secretary of state and Gina Haspel, who ran a torture site under George W. Bush, as CIA director. With Bolton’s appointment, the presidential candidate who vowed to get us out of “stupid” wars is now loading up for more. And with Congress having all but surrendered its national-security responsibilities, the United States—already mired in grinding conflicts from the Middle East to South Asia—seems on the verge of more armed adventurism.

Bolton is an unrepentant militarist who by all accounts is smart, sharp-elbowed, and relentless in peddling his fanatical views. Under Bush, he helped cook the intelligence to make the case for the Iraq War, surely the greatest US foreign-policy debacle since Vietnam, albeit one that Bolton still defends. And he has repeatedly advocated preventive war—in effect, an illegal war of aggression—against both Iran and North Korea.

The appointment of Bolton, along with the nominations of Pompeo and Haspel, is the ultimate Trump betrayal. Trump presented himself as an opponent of the Iraq invasion from the beginning. He condemned those “who’ve wasted $6 trillion on wars in the Middle East—we could have rebuilt our country twice—that have produced only more terrorism, more death, and more suffering. Imagine if that money had been spent at home.” Upon taking office, though, Trump abandoned his populist disguise, sending more troops to Afghanistan and to Syria as well, with the Pentagon announcing that US forces would remain there even after the Islamic State was defeated. Trump has doubled down on US support for Saudi Arabia’s criminal assault on Yemen, and he has increased the pace of US drone attacks, from North Africa to South Asia.

And now he has brought the most extreme and unreconstructed of hawks into the White House. Bolton will presumably push to tear up the nuclear deal with Iran by the mid-May legislative deadline—despite the fact that this historic multilateral deal is working and has the strong support of US allies. If Trump abrogates the deal and, in response, Tehran resumes the enrichment of uranium, a US or Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities will become much more likely, a step that Bolton has urged in writing.

Bolton may also try to blow up the pending talks with North Korea. He has consistently dismissed negotiations with Pyongyang as a waste of time, and he has already outlined how Trump’s meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un can serve as “diplomatic shock and awe” to set the stage for bombing that country. “Tell me you have begun total denuclearization, because we’re not going to have protracted negotiations,” ran his imagined script for Trump’s ultimatum to Kim.

“You can tell me right now or we’ll start thinking of something else.” If Bolton succeeds, he’ll push for far more than the “bloody nose” attack urged by some strategists. Bolton, who believes that US military strength enables Washington to bully nations all over the world, has also urged ramping up the pressures on Russia in Ukraine and on China in the South China Sea.

Who will stand in the way of catastrophic interventions that would further drain this country’s resources, establish it as an outlaw nation, and shatter alliances and good will? Perhaps Defense Secretary James Mattis will balk at adding to the Pentagon’s burdens. Perhaps Trump is merely bluffing, enacting a version of Richard Nixon’s “madman theory” of the presidency to scare adversaries into cutting a deal. Perhaps Trump will change his mind once more. Too much is riding on these slim reeds.

Bolton doesn’t need Senate confirmation to be-
Don’t Delete Facebook

Treat it like any other utility: Regulate it.

Fecebook is getting the pounding it deserves for its shocking carelessness in allowing the antidemocratic, lying sleazebags at Cambridge Analytica to harvest the data of some 50 million users. Plenty of my friends are fleeing Facebook in utterly justified outrage. They’re joining a growing #DeleteFacebook campaign—and those tardy we’ve-already-fixed-it apologies from Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg have only rubbed salt in the wound.

Still, I’m not joining the exodus—at least not yet. I still find Facebook a valuable and important self-publishing and communications platform. For all its flaws, it remains a vital tool for political activism—just look, for instance, at how important Facebook and other social media were in organizing the West Virginia teachers’ strike, or the wave of student mobilization after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, right up through the March for Our Lives rallies in Washington, DC, and more than 800 other locations around the world on March 24.

Don’t get me wrong: I think Zuckerberg and Sandberg should take an early retirement to Antarctica. But the root of the problem isn’t Facebook. It is about ideas and about politics: the mindless corporate libertarianism that dominates this company and the entire tech industry.

Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Google—the whole field is built on the idea that an individual’s data is a commodity to be mined, without regulation, like bauxite or titanium. Silicon Valley clings to the conviction that “free speech” means that host corporations have no responsibility for the consequential falsehoods, threats, and exploitative images published on their profit-making platforms; that the vast wealth generated by these ventures can be concentrated in the hands of a tiny, technocratic elite; and that these companies and their satellites are justified in incorporating in tax havens to protect themselves from even the minimal civic responsibilities incumbent on ordinary businesses. The liberal veneer of the tech industry on social issues masks rapacious betrayals of the broader social contract.

So, sure, we can hope for a better alternative to Facebook. We can hope for technology that does a better job of protecting privacy—the way Skype was supposed to be more secure than e-mail, until it wasn’t; the way WhatsApp is supposed to be better-encrypted messaging, except that it’s owned by Facebook; the way Signal is supposed to be even more impenetrable, until the day some hacker or intelligence agency breaks into it.

We can be on an endless hamster wheel of waiting for the Next Better Platform—which is only better until it isn’t. Or we can abandon the social-media ship, which takes us out of communication with millions. Either of these alternatives changes nothing; they only kick the can of tech-industry social responsibility down the road.

The genuine alternative: We can declare it’s time for communications platforms to be recognized as essential utilities for modern society—and, like other such utilities, they should be regulated, subject to robust public scrutiny and accountability.

Like most citizens, I am an ordinary social-media consumer, with little patience for discussions of APIs and algorithms. If I’d been born a century earlier, I would have been just as glassy-eyed at lectures by brilliant geologists and engineers about the then-new petroleum industry. But that’s exactly the point: It wasn’t the engineers and entrepreneurs of the Progressive era who finally reined in Standard Oil and other predatory trusts, which had been rigging prices without consequence and buying up legislators like five-cent cigars. It was a generation of reform-minded politicians, crusading lawyers, muckraking journalists, and outraged voters who valued their country’s century-old democratic experiment. These folks understood that the nation’s functional checks and balances had been upended and corrupted by unprecedented and unforeseen concentrations of wealth and influence. That is precisely what’s at stake in the Facebook mess, and why the often-liberal, sometimes-genius leaders of the tech industry now find themselves tied through Cambridge Analytica to some of the worst people on the planet. The issue isn’t about whether FarmVille has too much of your data. And it isn’t a problem that engineers or entrepreneurs can fix.

It’s clear that some good ideas are already out there, along with deeply informed voices sounding the alarm. I’m impressed by the decency and democratic motivations of the tech-industry dissidents at the Center for Humane Technology. There are also legislative efforts—tentative and limited—that go in the right direction: Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA) has proposed an Internet Bill of Rights, focused mainly on data privacy; Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) has called for regulating campaign advertising on social media the way it’s now regulated for broadcasters. But the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal—revealed, it should be noted, by transnational investigative reporters working in the muckraking tradition first defined in the Progressive reform wave against 19th-century...
West Virginia teachers made history when they went on strike for nine days, shutting schools from February 22 to March 6 over their dismal pay and shoddy benefits. Teachers in the state do not have a legal right to strike or to collectively bargain; still, they walked off the job to demand better compensation and walked back into their classrooms with a 5 percent raise.

The unrest, however, is not over. Teachers in Oklahoma have promised to strike beginning April 2 if their Legislature doesn’t give them a raise and increase money for schools. Striking is also illegal for Oklahoma’s teachers, but school superintendents have indicated they’ll shut down the schools to allow the educators to walk off the job. Teachers in Kentucky and Arizona are also considering walkouts.

It shouldn’t be shocking that teachers across the country are so fed up that they’re ready to strike. Teachers in West Virginia and Oklahoma may be among the worst-paid in the nation, but over the last decade, educators everywhere have been asked to do more for less.

Teachers have long been underpaid. Their average salary is a little over $58,000 a year. While that’s just below the national median income, teachers have the kinds of qualifications that should mean they bring home more than the average employee. About half of public-school teachers have a master’s degree, and nearly two-thirds have more than 10 years of job experience. And yet they make 17 percent less than other similarly educated workers, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Compensation for all college graduates rose over the last two decades, adjusted for inflation, but for teachers it actually declined. For every $1 someone else with a master’s makes...a teacher with a master’s makes 79 cents.

Things are even worse in both West Virginia (ranked 48th in the country for teacher pay) and Oklahoma (ranked 49th). Teachers in those states make approximately $46,000 and $45,000 a year, respectively. Accounting for inflation, teachers in West Virginia have taken an 11.2 percent pay cut since 2009, and those in Oklahoma have seen their pay decline by 15.3 percent.

But while being poorly compensated has a long history, teachers are now at their breaking point. Years of austerity have left them with few, if any, raises and even more work.

In the majority of the country, teachers are working in classrooms that are not being adequately funded, even after state budgets have gotten healthier as the recession has faded from view. As of 2015, state money allocated for schools was still lower than it was before the recession in 29 states. Oklahoma is the leader of that pack, having reduced it by more than a quarter over the last decade, but West Virginia has cut back by more than 11 percent. During this same period, many states also cut taxes, further starving themselves of resources that could go to schools.

One outcome of this austerity has been the dwindling of teachers’ ranks. More than 100,000 were laid off in the aftermath of the crisis, as federal stimulus money ran out and states grappled with extra expenditures to help the swelling ranks of those in need. There are 170,200 fewer public-school employees now than in the middle of 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, when budget cuts went into full effect in state legislatures around the country and they started thinning the number of public employees.

We still haven’t climbed out of that hole. In fact, there are 1.4 million more students today than there were in 2008. Given that increase, we’re actually missing a little over 200,000 additional public-school employees who would be needed just to accommodate the growing student body. Add it all up, and today’s public-school teachers are Shouldering the burden of work that should be handled by more than 400,000 co-workers who just aren’t there.

The most important factor in a child’s education—which will help determine her future course in life—is the quality of her teachers. And yet we’ve asked teachers to do this crucial work for what amounts to peanuts. No wonder they’re saying enough is enough.

BRYCE COVERT

The Math on Teachers Doesn’t Add Up
1 Inflation has undercut teacher pay.
Since 2009:
In West Virginia, teacher pay has dropped 11.2% and in Oklahoma 15.3%.

2 Highly educated teachers are especially underpaid...
47% of public-school teachers have master’s degrees.
For every $1 someone else with a master’s makes...

3 ...even though we need them more than ever.
Since 2008, there are 170,200 fewer public-school employees but...
1.4 million more students.
trusts—shows that the stakes are bigger, so the solutions must be more ambitious. As citizens, we can demand powerful legislation offsetting social-media companies’ unique and destabilizing concentration of power. As users and consumers, we can demand that these companies—starting with Facebook—live up to a higher standard.

So, while I’m not leaving the field, if someone wants to organize a #DayWithoutFacebook to demand a new social-media pact—count me in.  

Bruce Shaprio, a contributing editor to The Nation, is executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.

6 Minutes, 20 Seconds

The Parkland movement goes deep.

A few days after a disturbed young man murdered 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida—an act that took just six minutes and 20 seconds—survivor Emma González galvanized a student revolt against gun violence with a fiery speech calling out NRA-bought politicians. On March 24, at the March for Our Lives in Washington, DC, González galvanized a movement with her silence.

She recited the names of all 17 victims and then stood mute, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyes sometimes closed. The crowd, who had been rooting for the young woman with the shaved head, grew confused. Minutes earlier, a nervous Parkland classmate had actually vomited on stage during her speech, before recovering with world-class aplomb. “I just threw up on international television, and it feels great!” Samantha Fuentes told the crowd. Was González having a case of nerves? Next to me, Parkland resident and substitute teacher Debbi Schapiro watched her anxiously, then shook her head and murmured, “This is too much responsibility for these kids.” A few students in the crowd tried to start the chant “Never again,” but it faded quickly. Spontaneously, they fell silent and simply held their protest signs high.

González finally spoke. “Since the time that I came out here, it has been six minutes and 20 seconds,” she said. “Fight for your lives before it’s someone else’s job.”

Emma González’s remarkable poise was one revelation of the March for Our Lives, which drew as many as 2 million demonstrators to rallies across the country, making it one of the largest student protests in US history. Earlier, in the press tent, González was listening to the official pre-march playlist—“Yes! I got Celia Cruz on this!”—nodding to the beat while she fielded questions from a dozen or so reporters. About the flurry of inadequate but still promising gun-safety measures passed since Parkland, she said: “It feels like they tried to take a giant step—and then they tripped. I’m not gonna knock it; it’s a good first start.” It was the kind of “We’ll get ‘em next time” equanimity that activists normally take years, or even decades, to perfect. The movement, González told reporters, “is probably gonna be years, and at this point, I don’t know that I mind. Nothing that’s worth it is easy. We’re going against the largest gun lobby. We could very well die trying to do this. But we could very well die not trying to do this, too. So why not die for something rather than nothing?”

Also in the press tent was Vanity Fair writer Dave Cullen, whom I decided to trail because we have a history together on this issue. On April 20, 1999, Cullen called me at Salon, where I was news editor at the time, with reports of a school shooting at nearby Columbine High. For a while afterward, he filed stories almost daily, absorbing the pain of the families and the survivors. Ten years later, he wrote the remarkable best-seller Columbine. In the years since, I’ve watched from afar as, after every school shooting, he writes articles, goes on TV, and often visits with survivors. He does this out of a sense of duty, but I can see how it drains him.

But Parkland hasn’t drained Cullen; in fact, the students’ response has energized him. “This is completely different,” he told me. “I swore I’d never come back to a scene [of a mass shooting].
But this isn’t about just their grief, horror, pain, and sadness. This is about doing something.” When he wrote Columbine, Cullen worked hard to make the book roughly half about the victims and survivors and half about the killers. “But 90 percent of the questions I get, everywhere, are about the killers. I really thought it was a lost cause to focus these stories on the survivors.” But Parkland “flipped the script,” he continued. So much so that strolling through an airport recently and seeing a news story about the killer, “I realized I forgot his name.”

The other revelation of the day is how hard the Parkland students have endeavored to meld their cause to the cause of young black people, who disproportionately suffer from gun violence. I met Curtis Kelly, the father of 16-year-old Zaire Kelly, who was shot and killed during a robbery in DC last year as he was coming home from a college-prep class. Kelly says the Parkland students have been working with students at Thurgood Marshall Academy, where Zaire and his twin brother, Zion, both went to school. Zion Kelly spoke at the rally, and he choked up talking about his brother: “Can you imagine how it would be to lose someone that close to you?”

The diverse speakers’ list also included Yolanda Renee King, the 9-year-old granddaughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Looking eerily like her grandfather, she led a chant, smiling and cheering: “Spread the word! Have you heard? All across the nation, we are going to be a great generation!”

Cullen told me that, behind the scenes, many of the Parkland survivors spend much of their time connecting with gun-violence victims of color. Less than three weeks after the shooting, they met with Chicago high-school students to discuss their common plight. “People of color in inner-cities and everywhere have been dealing with this for a despicably long time, and the media cycles just don’t cover the violence the way they did here,” González tweeted on March 4. In many ways, the Parkland students are building on the Black Lives Matter organizing done by groups like the Dream Defenders and the Movement for Black Lives in the six years since Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, was gunned down by vigilante George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, 200 miles from Parkland.

“They really see the bigger picture,” Cullen told me. “They know there’s more power if they join forces with kids from Chicago and everywhere—that’s where victory is.”

When the speakers’ program was finished, people milled about, almost as if they didn’t want to leave. I again ran into Debbi Schapiro, the Parkland resident who had worried that Emma González’s five or so minutes of silence represented trauma, not a deliberate message. Schapiro seemed relieved that the rally was over. “It was phenomenal; it went straight to the heart,” she said. “We are a broken community. One that is going to band together. But we are truly broken.”

I reminded Schapiro that she had at first thought González’s silence meant that she was overwhelmed, that she had taken on “too much.” Schapiro replied, “It is too much. They’re children. I mean, they chose to do this. But they’ve lost their childhoods.”

JOAN WALSH

“Fight for your lives before it’s someone else’s job.”

HURRICANE HARVEY

After the Flood: Debt

The day before Hurricane Harvey ripped through Houston last August, the US Army Corps of Engineers predicted in an internal memo that the storm would flood neighborhoods on the western edge of Barker Reservoir. This forecast wasn’t made public until two days into the hurricane, when many homes were already underwater.

The Army Corps had long predicted this scenario, according to reports obtained through a pending class-action lawsuit. In 1962, the Corps first calculated that a storm would inundate thousands of acres bordering the reservoir. But as Houston continued to expand, developers built on the land anyway. In 1986, the Corps again acknowledged, in private, that the reservoir’s maximum flood area extended into residential communities.

The plaintiffs in the pending suit in the DC Court of Federal Claims are seeking compensation, asserting that the government intentionally and knowingly flooded their property. Traditionally, the federal government has had legal immunity from flood-based lawsuits, and the US Army Corps of Engineers has argued that it cannot be held responsible for damage after an extreme event. Since these neighborhoods do not fall within the designated 100-year floodplain, homeowners are not required by law to purchase flood insurance, and many did not. Now they face steep debts as a result. “This is a bona fide public-policy debacle,” says a local attorney who supports a full congressional investigation. —Emmalina Glinskis
A Muted Response

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Policing

A Liberal Populism

What can Democrats learn from Robert F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign?

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, inspired an important debate with his recent report “The Inclusive Populism of Robert F. Kennedy.” In The New York Times, he argues that Kennedy’s 82-day 1968 presidential campaign provides a model for liberals who seek to recapture the allegiance of white, working-class voters and “forge a powerful coalition” based on a “liberalism without elitism and a populism without racism.”

The debate has two components: First, is this really what happened in 1968? And second, does the campaign really provide a road map a half-century later? Kahlenberg, like many before him, posits the contest as a battle between two manifestations of populism: the inclusive, liberal economic populism of RFK and the resentful, racially driven right-wing populism of George Wallace. While strongly supported by black voters, Kennedy succeeded in places like Indiana by poaching Wallace voters with appeals to patriotic symbols and “law and order” policies. He did this so aggressively that Richard Nixon, the GOP candidate for president, worried that “people think Bobby is more a law-and-order man than I am!” And then—California Governor Ronald Reagan was pleased to note that “Kennedy was talking more and more like me.” Yet, in addition to those who were openly racist, Kennedy dominated among black and brown voters. As the Times noted in 1968, Kennedy was able to assemble “an unusual coalition of Negroes and lower income whites,” and he did well “with blue-collar workers in the industrial areas and with rural whites.”

Can liberals do the same today? Did they ever do it in the first place? As the historian Garry Wills has pointed out, Robert Kennedy’s coalition was not exactly stable. It required the candidate to say things in one place that would have lost him votes in another. Had Kennedy sought to challenge Hubert Humphrey for the support of big-city bosses in places like Chicago and Philadelphia, which would have been necessary to win the nomination, he would have had to alienate black supporters in those places, who lived with the discrimination and oppression the bosses enforced. Once the national media began to point out these contradictions, the coalition quite likely would have imploded.

Robert Kennedy was a unique candidate in many respects: He was charismatic, dramatic, inspiring, deeply Catholic, and, perhaps most important, the brother of the then-sainted slain president. Additionally, a successful coalition is a matter of knitting together not just black and white but a genuine “rainbow” of complicated self-defined identities. Yet Kennedy did not do well with what is today the backbone of the Democratic Party: urban and suburban, college-educated, well-to-do voters—those so frequently demonized as “liberal elitists” by Trump supporters and cable-news pundits. (In the ‘68 primaries, they largely voted for Eugene McCarthy, who ran on an anti-Vietnam War platform.)

Given the fact that they—dare I say “we”?—are now considered Public Enemy No. 1 by “populist” Trump voters, it’s fair to say that the differences between 1968 and 2018 may matter more than the similarities.

Historians tend to be wary of instructional historical analogies, for good reason: History has too many unknown variables that interfere with useful lessons. But with or without a 50-year-old “usable past,” the political quandary of attracting white, blue-collar voters is a crucial one. According to the pollster Guy Molyneux, 35 percent of so-called “white working-class” voters—about 23 million people—are potential swing voters in the 2018 and 2020 elections. That’s too many people to write off and still win elections. But the question that liberal Democrats face is how to appeal to that segment without driving down turnout among core constituencies and betraying the principles that made them liberals in the first place. Yes, income inequality has significantly increased since 1968, and this should help entice “populists” away from the party of plutocrats.

Income inequality has significantly increased since 1968, and this should help entice “populists” away from the party of plutocrats.

—Safiya Charles

The Liberal Media

Eric Alterman

Theresa NAS/REUTERS
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to say impossible—by the rise of Fox News, Breitbart, Infowars, and the countless projects of the Koch brothers and the Mercer family (including Cambridge Analytica), to say nothing of Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and all the bots and hackers (Russian and otherwise) who love to exploit them. These are the folks who have succeeded in turning the word “liberal” into an epithet among these same white, working-class voters whom liberals hope to reach. Robert Kennedy, moreover, at least had his speeches accurately covered by a media that did not yet consider outright lies as “alternative facts.”

One of the rarely discussed effects of the rise of so much right-wing media has been its success in converting our political discourse to reflect its linguistic biases. Nowhere is this clearer than with the word “populist,” which, despite the inroads made by Bernie Sanders, has come to imply Trump-style racism, sexism, and xenophobia among white men. But as the leading historian of the topic, Georgetown’s Michael Kazin, observes, while the language of populism has historically been up for grabs among those battling elites, “the right captured it in the late 1960s and 1970s with its praise of ‘Middle America’ and attacks on ‘limousine liberals.’ The left has struggled to reclaim populism with talk of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent, which the Sanders-Warren wing of the Democratic Party expresses with vigor. But in our politics, cultural divisions usually carry more weight than economic ones.” That being said, after the Parkland shooting, gun control has now become an urgent demand for a wide swath of America. With hundreds of thousands filling the streets demanding reform, we can honor Robert Kennedy—together with the young people he likely would have admired and doubtless inspired—with a genuine and sustained commitment at least to helping them save their own lives.

RFK at least had his speeches accurately covered by a media that did not yet consider outright lies as “alternative facts.”

COMIX NATION

JEN SORENSEN

PRIVACY BREAKTHROUGH

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The Analog Times

Cambridge Analytica

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If you are one of the 48 million Americans suffering from hearing loss, we have great news for you. An innovative team of doctors and engineers have teamed up to create a truly revolutionary personal sound amplifier. It’s not a hearing aid—those require trips to the audiologist, hearing tests and can cost as much as $5,000. It’s also not a cheap amplifier that just makes everything louder, making it virtually impossible to hear conversations. It’s Perfect Choice HD Ultra™... and it may be the perfect solution for you.

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Electable, but Ineligible?

Abdul El-Sayed, a Democrat running for governor of Michigan, has asked a judge to rule on his eligibility to serve in the state’s highest office. Michigan’s Constitution stipulates that a gubernatorial candidate must be a “registered elector” in the state for four years before the general election. In 2003, El-Sayed registered to vote in Michigan. In 2014, he was living in New York, where he studied and later taught medicine at Columbia University. His voter registration in Michigan was never canceled, but a few legal experts still doubt his eligibility.

Losing El-Sayed from the gubernatorial race—and on a technicality, given his 10-plus years voting in the state—would be a major blow to Michigan’s progressives. He is well to the left of the Democratic front-runner, Gretchen Whitmer. He wants to implement single-payer health care and make college tuition-free for low-income and middle-class families. El-Sayed is also what analysts like to call “electable.” The Guardian hailed him as “the new Obama.” He’s a Rhodes Scholar, 33 years old, and photogenic. When he was 30, El-Sayed became director of Detroit’s Health Department—the youngest person ever to hold such a position in a major American city. And if elected, he would be the first Muslim governor in the country.

El-Sayed’s campaign has framed the issue of his eligibility as an attempt by party insiders to derail his chance of becoming governor. In a fund-raising e-mail, the candidate wrote that “establishment Democrats” were “resorting to the kind of birther tactics” used against Barack Obama.

—Joseph Hogan

The Wolf Among Us

When I left the United States for the United Kingdom in 2015, with Black Lives Matter at its height and my book on child victims of gun violence recently completed, some assumed that it was the racism that had pushed me away. But, as I would point out, if it was aggressive policing and racial disadvantage I was seeking to avoid, I would not be heading back to London.

When the UK voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, many Brits then asked if I regretted leaving the States for the xenophobia and isolationism of Brexit Britain. But if it was xenophobia and isolationism I wanted to run away from, I’d point out, I wouldn’t be running toward America.

When the United States elected Donald Trump five months later, American friends told me I was lucky I had left. However bad things were in Britain, they assured me, they couldn’t get any worse than this. Meanwhile, some British doomsayers insisted they had it worse: “Trump will be gone in four years, but Brexit takes us out of the European Union forever.”

The argument about which country is, at present, the most dysfunctional is of course futile, since the answer would render neither any less dysfunctional. Britain set itself an unnecessary question, the answer would render neither any less dysfunctional, but it could never compete with the electoral expediency of playing possum at the first whiff of anti-racists in particular along with more advanced sections of the left, for Britain to reckon with its post-imperial status, multi-racial realities, and need for migrant labor. This was always necessary, but it could never compete with the electoral expediency of playing possum at the first whiff of cheap populism, xenophobia, and jingoism.

Challenge bigotry, we were told, would cost us whatever election we were fighting. But sooner or later, these debts come due. Brexit was, in no small part, a consequence of the refusal to engage with the issues of race, migration, and loss of empire.

Brexit was, in no small part, a consequence of the refusal to engage with the issues of race, migration, and loss of empire.
in the United States, there has been a push, from anti-racists in particular along with more advanced sections of the left, for America to reckon with the legacy of its racism. But beyond lip service, when it came to policy and politics, there was less money and fewer votes to be had in taking a clear stand against racism than in claiming you were better equipped to manage its systemic consequences, whether they were in the prisons, schools, or unemployment lines. Trump is, in no small part, a product of that neglect. His desire to “Make America Great Again” shares the same racial melancholic longing of those who seek to put the “Great” back into Great Britain.

Shuttling between the two countries over the last three years, these developments have appeared not aberrant, but consistent, with what has long been evident in both places. As a black Briton and an anti-racist activist, the issues that produced these situations have always been urgent, which is why I never sought to privilege the idea of living with the racism in one country over the other.

On both sides of the Atlantic, we argued that, whatever short-term benefits there might be in pandering to racism rather than challenging it, over the long term, ignoring racism and imperialism would prove devastating for the entire left and liberal cause. Mainstream left parties interested in the next election thought we were crying wolf. Lampooning our warnings as “identity politics”—which seems to mean anything you like so long as you don’t like it—they dismissed these claims as the marginal views of marginalized people. But the thing people forget about Aesop’s fable is that, at the end of the day, there really was a wolf. This is the wolf that is prowling through our polities and mauling our political cultures. I never had the luxury of thinking I could escape it. Sadly, this might be what it takes for others to understand why.

SNAPSHOT / JACQUELYN MARTIN

Flowers of War

An activist places a few of the 5,000 flowers that were laid in front of the Capitol building to commemorate the 5,000 children said to be killed or maimed by Saudi Arabia’s air attacks in Yemen since March 2015.

GETTING A JOB AT THE WHITE HOUSE

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You only need comment quite often on Fox.

Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet
Things didn’t end well between George Carlo and Tom Wheeler; the last time the two met face-to-face, Wheeler had security guards escort Carlo off the premises. As president of the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association (CTIA), Wheeler was the wireless industry’s point man in Washington. Carlo was the scientist handpicked by Wheeler to defuse a public-relations crisis that threatened to strangle his infant industry in its crib. This was back in 1993, when there were only six cell-phone subscriptions for every 100 adults in the United States. But industry executives were looking forward to a booming future.

Remarkably, cell phones had been allowed onto the US consumer market a decade earlier without any government safety testing. Now, some customers and industry workers were being diagnosed with cancer. In January 1993, David Reynard sued the NEC America Company, claiming that his wife’s NEC phone caused her lethal brain tumor. After Reynard appeared on national TV, the story went viral. A congressional subcommittee announced an investigation; investors began dumping their cell-phone stocks; and Wheeler and the CTIA swung into action.

A week later, Wheeler announced that his industry would pay for a comprehensive research program. Cell phones were already safe, Wheeler told reporters; the new research would simply “re-validate the findings of the existing studies.”

George Carlo seemed like a good bet to fulfill Wheeler’s mission. He was an epidemiologist who also had a law degree, and he’d conducted studies for other controversial industries. After a study funded by Dow Corning, Carlo had declared that breast implants posed only minimal health risks. With chemical-industry funding, he had concluded that low levels of dioxin, the chemical behind the Agent Orange scandal, were not dangerous. In 1995, Carlo began directing the industry-financed Wireless Technology Research project (WTR), whose eventual budget of $28.5 million made it the best-funded investigation of cell-phone safety to date.

Outside critics soon came to suspect that Carlo would be the front man for an industry whitewash. They cited his dispute with Henry Lai, a professor of biochemistry at the University of Washington, over a study that Lai had conducted examining whether cell-phone radiation could damage DNA. In 1999, Carlo and the WTR’s general counsel sent a letter to the university’s president urging that Lai be fired for his alleged violation of research protocols. Lai accused the WTR of tampering with his experiment’s results. Both Carlo and Lai deny the other’s accusations.

Critics also attacked what they regarded as the slow pace of WTR research. The WTR was merely “a confidence game” designed to placate the public but stall real research, according to Louis Slesin, editor of the trade pub-
HOW BIG WIRELESS MADE US THINK THAT CELL PHONES ARE SAFE

Whatever Carlo’s motives might have been, the documented fact is that he and Wheeler would eventually clash bitterly over the WTR’s findings, which Carlo presented to wireless-industry leaders on February 9, 1999. By that date, the WTR had commissioned more than 30 original studies and reviewed many more. Those studies raised “serious questions” about cell-phone safety, Carlo told a closed-door meeting of the CTIA’s board of directors, whose members included the CEOs or top officials of the industry’s 32 leading companies, including Apple, AT&T, and Motorola.

Carlo sent letters to each of the industry’s chieftains on October 7, 1999, reiterating that the WTR’s research had found the following: “The risk of rare neuro-epithelial tumors on the outside of the brain was more than doubled...in cell phone users”; there was an apparent “correlation between brain tumors occurring on the right side of the head and the use of the phone on the right side of the head”; and “the ability of radiation from a phone’s antenna to cause functional genetic damage [was] definitely positive....”

Carlo urged the CEOs to do the right thing: give consumers “the information they need to make an informed judgment about how much of this unknown risk they wish to assume,” especially since some in the industry had “repeatedly and falsely claimed that wireless phones are safe for all consumers including children.”

The very next day, a livid Tom Wheeler began publicly trashing Carlo to the media. In a letter he shared with the CEOs, Wheeler told Carlo that the CTIA was “certain that you have never provided CTIA with the studies you mention”—an apparent effort to shield the industry from liability in the lawsuits that had led to Carlo’s hiring in the first place. Wheeler charged further that the studies had not been published in peer-reviewed journals, casting doubt on their validity.

Wheeler’s tactics succeeded in dousing the controversy. Although Carlo had in fact repeatedly briefed Wheeler and other senior industry officials on the studies, which had indeed undergone peer review and would soon be published, reporters on the technology beat accepted Wheeler’s discrediting of Carlo and the WTR’s findings. (Wheeler would go on to chair the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates the wireless industry. He agreed to an interview for this article but then put all of his remarks off the record, with one exception: his statement that he has always taken scientific guidance from the US Food and Drug Administration, which, he said, “has concluded, ‘the weight of scientific evidence had not linked cell phones with any health problems.’”)

Why, after such acrimony, Carlo was allowed to make one last appearance before the CTIA board is a mystery. Whatever the reason, Carlo flew to New Orleans in February 2000 for the wireless industry’s annual conference, where he submitted the WTR’s final report to the CTIA board. According to Carlo, Wheeler made sure that none of the hundreds of journalists covering the event could get anywhere near him.

When Carlo arrived, he was met by two seriously mucked men in plain clothes; the larger of the two let drop that he had recently left the Secret Service. The security men steered Carlo into a holding room, where they insisted he remain until his presentation. When summoned, Carlo found roughly 70 of the industry’s top executives waiting for him in silence. Carlo had spoken a mere 10 minutes when Wheeler abruptly stood, extended a hand, and said, “Thank you, George.” The two muscle men then ushered the scientist to a curbside taxi and waited until it pulled away.

In the years to come, the WTR’s cautionary findings would be replicated by numerous other scientists in the United States and around the world, leading the World Health Organization in 2011 to classify cell-phone radiation as a “possible” human carcinogen and the governments of Great Britain, France, and Israel to issue strong warnings on cell-phone use by children. But as the taxi carried Carlo to Louis Armstrong International Airport, the scientist wondered whether his relationship with the industry might have turned out differently if cell phones had been safety-tested before being allowed onto the consumer market, before profit took precedence over science. But it was too late: Wheeler and his fellow executives had made it clear, Carlo told The Nation, that “they would do what they had to do to protect their industry, but they were not of a mind to protect consumers or public health.”

This article does not argue that cell phones and other wireless technologies are necessarily dangerous; that is a matter for scientists to decide. Rather, the focus here is on the global industry behind cell phones—and the industry’s long campaign to make people believe that cell phones are safe.

That campaign has plainly been a success: 95 out of every 100 adult Americans now own a cell phone; globally, three out of four adults have cell-phone access, with sales increasing every year. The wireless industry is now one of the fastest-growing on Earth and one of the biggest, boasting annual sales of $440 billion in 2016.

Carlo’s story underscores the need for caution, however, particularly since it evokes eerie parallels with two of the most notorious cases of corporate deception on record: the campaigns by the tobacco and fossil-fuel industries to obscure the dangers of smoking and climate change, respectively. Just as tobacco executives were privately told by their own scientists (in the 1960s) that smoking was deadly, and fossil-fuel executives were privately told by
their own scientists (in the 1980s) that burning oil, gas, and coal would cause a “catastrophic” temperature rise, so Carlo’s testimony reveals that wireless executives were privately told by their own scientists (in the 1990s) that cell phones could cause cancer and genetic damage.

Carlo’s October 7, 1999, letters to wireless-industry CEOs are the smoking-gun equivalent of the November 12, 1982, memo that M.B. Glaser, Exxon’s manager of environmental-affairs programs, sent to company executives explaining that burning oil, gas, and coal could raise global temperatures by a destabilizing 3 degrees Celsius by 2100. For the tobacco industry, Carlo’s letters are akin to the 1969 proposal that a Brown & Williamson executive wrote for countering anti-tobacco advocates. “Doubt is our product,” the memo declared. “It is also the means of establishing a controversy...at the public level.”

Like their tobacco and fossil-fuel brethren, wireless executives have chosen not to publicize what their own scientists have said about the risks of their products. On the contrary, the industry—in America, Europe, and Asia—has spent untold millions of dollars in the past 25 years proclaiming that science is on its side, that the critics are quacks, and that consumers have nothing to fear. This, even as the industry has worked behind the scenes—again like its Big Tobacco counterpart—to deliberately addict its customers. Just as cigarette companies added nicotine to hook smokers, so have wireless companies designed cell phones to deliver a jolt of dopamine with each swipe of the screen.

This Nation investigation reveals that the wireless industry not only made the same moral choices that the tobacco and fossil-fuel industries did; it also borrowed from the same public-relations playbook those industries pioneered. The playbook’s key insight is that an industry doesn’t have to win the scientific argument about safety; it only has to keep the argument going. That amounts to a win for the industry, because the apparent lack of certainty helps to reassure customers, even as it fends off government regulations and lawsuits that might pinch profits.

Central to keeping the scientific argument going is making it appear that not all scientists agree. Again like the tobacco and fossil-fuel industries, the wireless industry has “war gamed” science, as a Motorola internal memo in 1994 phrased it. War-gaming science involves playing offense as well as defense: funding studies friendly to the industry while attacking studies that raise questions; placing industry-friendly experts on advisory bodies like the World Health Organization; and seeking to discredit scientists whose views depart from the industry’s.

Funding friendly research has perhaps been the most important component of this strategy, because it conveys the impression that the scientific community truly is divided. Thus, when studies have linked wireless radiation to cancer or genetic damage—as Carlo’s WTR did in 1999; as the WHO’s Interphone study did in 2010; and as the US National Toxicology Program did in 2016—in industry spokespeople can point out, accurately, that other studies disagree. “[T]he overall balance of the evidence” gives no cause for alarm, asserted Jack Rowley, research and sustainability director for the Groupe Special Mobile Association (GSMA), Europe’s wireless trade association, speaking to reporters about the WHO’s findings.

A closer look reveals the industry’s sleight of hand. When Henry Lai, the professor whom Carlo tried to get fired, analyzed 326 safety-related studies completed between 1990 and 2005, he learned that 56 percent found a biological effect from cell-phone radiation and 44 percent did not; the scientific community apparently was split. But when Lai recategorized the studies according to their funding sources, a different picture emerged: 67 percent of the independently funded studies found a biological effect, while a mere 28 percent of the industry-funded studies did. Lai’s findings were replicated by a 2007 analysis in Environmental Health Perspectives that concluded industry-funded studies were two and a half times less likely than independent studies to find a health effect.

One key player has not been swayed by all this wireless-friendly research: the insurance industry. The Nation has not been able to find a single insurance company willing to sell a product-liability policy that covered cell-phone radiation. “Why would we want to do that?” one executive chuckled before pointing to more than two dozen lawsuits outstanding against wireless companies, demanding a total of $1.9 billion in damages. Some judges have affirmed such lawsuits, including a judge in Italy who refused to allow industry-funded research as evidence.

Even so, the industry’s neutralizing of the safety issue has opened the door to the biggest, most hazardous prize of all: the proposed revolutionary transformation of society dubbed the “Internet of Things.” Lauded as a gigantic engine of economic growth, the Internet of Things will not only connect people through their smartphones and computers but will connect those devices to a customer’s vehicles and home appliances, even their baby’s diapers—all at speeds faster than can currently be achieved.

There is a catch, though: The Internet of Things will require augmenting today’s 4G technology with 5G, thus “massively increasing” the general population’s exposure to radiation, according to a petition signed by 236 scientists worldwide who have published more than 2,000
peer-reviewed studies and represent “a significant portion of the credentialed scientists in the radiation research field,” according to Joel Moskowitz, the director of the Center for Family and Community Health at the University of California, Berkeley, who helped circulate the petition. Nevertheless, like cell phones, 5G technology is on the verge of being introduced without premarket safety testing.

Lack of definitive proof that a technology is harmful does not mean the technology is safe, yet the wireless industry has succeeded in selling this logical fallacy to the world. In truth, the safety of wireless technology has been an unsettled question since the industry’s earliest days. The upshot is that, over the past 30 years, billions of people around the world have been subjected to a massive public-health experiment: Use a cell phone today, find out later if it causes cancer or genetic damage. Meanwhile, the wireless industry has obstructed a full and fair understanding of the current science, aided by government agencies that have prioritized commercial interests over human health and news organizations that have failed to inform the public about what the scientific community really thinks. In other words, this public-health experiment has been conducted without the informed consent of its subjects, even as the industry keeps its thumb on the scale.

The absence of absolute proof does not mean the absence of risk,” Annie Sasco, the former director of epidemiology for cancer prevention at France’s National Institute of Health and Medical Research, told the attendees of the 2012 Childhood Cancer conference. “The younger one starts using cell phones, the higher the risk,” Sasco continued, urging a public-education effort to inform parents, politicians, and the press about children’s exceptional susceptibility.

For adults and children alike, the process by which wireless radiation may cause cancer remains uncertain, but it is thought to be indirect. Wireless radiation has been shown to damage the blood-brain barrier, a vital defense mechanism that shields the brain from carcinogenic chemicals elsewhere in the body (resulting, for example, from secondhand cigarette smoke). Wireless radiation has also been shown to interfere with DNA replication, a proven progenitor of cancer. In each of these cases, the risks are higher for children: Their skulls, being smaller, absorb more radiation than adults’ skulls do, while children’s longer life span increases their cumulative exposure.

The wireless industry has sought to downplay concerns about cell phones’ safety, and the Federal Communications Commission has followed its example. In 1996, the FCC established cell-phone safety levels based on “specific absorption rate,” or SAR. Phones were required to have a SAR of 1.6 watts or less per kilogram of body weight. In 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics advised the FCC that its guidelines “do not account for the unique vulnerability and use patterns specific to pregnant women and children.” Nevertheless, the FCC has declined to update its standards.

The FCC has granted the industry’s wishes so often that it qualifies as a “captured agency,” argued journalist Norm Alster in a report that Harvard University’s Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics published in 2015. The FCC allows cell-phone manufacturers to self-report SAR levels, and does not independently test industry claims or require manufacturers to display the SAR level on a phone’s packaging. “Industry controls the FCC through a soup-to-nuts stranglehold that extends from its well-placed campaign spending in Congress through its control of the FCC’s congressional oversight committees to its persistent agency lobbying,” Alster wrote. He also quoted the CTIA website praising the FCC for “its light regulatory touch.”

The revolving-door syndrome that characterizes so many industries and federal agencies reinforces the close relationship between the wireless industry and the FCC. Just as Tom Wheeler went from running the CTIA (1992–2004) to chairing the FCC (2013–2017), Meredith Atwell Baker went from FCC commissioner (2009–2011) to the presidency of the CTIA (2014 through today). To ensure its access on Capitol Hill, the wireless industry made $26 million in campaign contributions in 2016, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, and spent $87 million on lobbying in 2017.

Neutralizing the safety issue has been an ongoing imperative because the research keeps coming, much of it from outside the United States. But the industry’s European and Asian branches have, like their US counterpart, zealously war-gamed the science, spun the news coverage, and thereby warped the public perception of their products’ safety.

The WHO began to study the health effects of electric- and magnetic-field radiation (EMF) in 1996 under the direction of Michael Repacholi, an Australian biophysicist. Although Repacholi claimed on disclosure forms that he was “independent” of corporate influence, in fact Motorola had funded his research: While Repacholi was director of the WHO’s EMF program, Motorola paid $50,000 a year to his former employer, the Royal Adelaide Hospital, which then transferred the money to the WHO program. When journalists exposed the payments, Repacholi denied that there was anything untoward about them because
Motorola had not paid him personally. Eventually, Motorola's payments were bundled with other industry contributions and funneled through the Mobile and Wireless Forum, a trade association that gave the WHO's program $150,000 annually. In 1999, Repacholi helped engineer a WHO statement that “EMF exposures below the limits recommended in international guidelines do not appear to have any known consequence on health.”

Two wireless trade associations contributed $4.7 million to the Interphone study launched by the WHO's International Agency for Cancer Research in 2000. That $4.7 million represented 20 percent of the $24 million budget for the Interphone study, which convened 21 scientists from 13 countries to explore possible links between cell phones and two common types of brain tumor: glioma and meningioma. The money was channeled through a "firewall" mechanism intended to prevent corporate influence on the IACR's findings, but whether such firewalls work is debatable. “Industry sponsors know [which scientists] receive funding; sponsored scientists know who provides funding,” Dariusz Leszczynski, an adjunct professor of biochemistry at the University of Helsinki, has explained.

To be sure, the industry could not have been pleased with some of the Interphone study's conclusions. The study found that the heaviest cell-phone users were 80 percent more likely to develop glioma. (The initial finding of 40 percent was increased to 80 to correct for selection bias.) The Interphone study also concluded that individuals who had owned a cell phone for 10 years or longer saw their risk of glioma increase by nearly 120 percent. However, the study did not find any increased risk for individuals who used their cell phones less frequently; nor was there evidence of any connection with meningioma.

When the Interphone conclusions were released in 2010, industry spokespeople blunted their impact by deploying what experts on lying call “creative truth-telling.” “Interphone's conclusion of no overall increased risk of brain cancer is consistent with conclusions reached in an already large body of scientific research on this subject,” John Walls, the vice president for public affairs at the CTIA, told reporters. The wiggle word here is “overall”: Since some of the Interphone studies did not find increased brain-cancer rates, stipulating “overall” allowed Walls to ignore those that did. The misleading spin confused enough news organizations that their coverage of the Interphone study was essentially reassuring to the industry's customers. The Wall Street Journal announced “Cell Phone Study Sends Fuzzy Signal on Cancer Risk,” while the BBC's headline declared: “No Proof of Mobile Cancer Risk.”

The industry's $4.7 million contribution to the WHO appears to have had its most telling effect in May 2011, when the WHO convened scientists in Lyon, France, to discuss how to classify the cancer risk posed by cell phones. The industry not only secured “observer” status at Lyon for three of its trade associations; it placed two industry-funded experts on the working group that would debate the classification, as well as additional experts among the “invited specialists” who advised the group.

Niels Kuster, a Swiss engineer, initially filed a conflict-of-interest statement affirming only that his research group had taken money from “various governments, scientific institutions and corporations.” But after Kuster co-authored a summary of the WHO's findings in The Lancet Oncology, the medical journal issued a correction expanding on Kuster's conflict-of-interest statement, noting payments from the Mobile Manufacturers Forum, Motorola, Ericsson, Nokia, Samsung, Sony, GSMA, and Deutsche Telekom. Nevertheless, Kuster participated in the entire 10 days of deliberations.

The industry also mounted a campaign to discredit Lennart Hardell, a Swedish professor of oncology serving on the working group. Hardell's studies, which found an increase in gliomas and acoustic neuromas in long-term cell-phone users, were some of the strongest evidence that the group was considering.

Hardell had already attracted the industry's displeasure back in 2002, when he began arguing that children shouldn’t use cell phones. Two scientists with industry ties quickly published a report with the Swedish Radiation Authority dismissing Hardell's research. His detractors were John D. Boice and Joseph K. McLaughlin of the International Epidemiology Institute, a company that provided “Litigation Support” and “Corporate Counseling” to various industries, according to its website. Indeed, at the very time Boice and McLaughlin were denigrating Hardell's work, the institute was providing expert-witness services to Motorola in a brain-tumor lawsuit against the company.

The wireless industry didn't get the outcome that it wanted at Lyon, but it did limit the damage. A number of the working group's scientists had favored increasing the classification of cell phones to Category 2A, a “probable” carcinogen; but in the end, the group could only agree on an increase to 2B, a “possible” carcinogen.

That result enabled the industry to continue proclaiming that there was no scientifically established proof that cell phones are dangerous. Jack Rowley of the GSMA trade association said that “interpretation should be based on the overall balance of the evidence.” Once again, the slippery word “overall” downplayed the significance of scientific research that the industry didn’t like.

Industry-funded scientists had been pressuring their colleagues for a decade by then, according to Leszczynski, another member of the Lyon working group. Leszczynski was an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School when he first experienced such pressure, in 1999. He had wanted to investigate the effects of radiation levels higher than the SAR levels permitted by government, hypothesizing that this might better conform to real-world practices. But when he proposed the idea at scientific meetings, Leszczynski said, it was shouted down by Mays Swicord, Joe Elder, and C.K. Chou—scientists who worked for Motorola. As Leszczynski recalled, “It was a...
normal occurrence at scientific meetings—and I attended really a lot of them—that whenever [a] scientist reported biological effects at SAR over [government-approved levels], the above-mentioned industry scientists, singularly or as a group, jumped up to the microphone to condemn and to discredit the results.”

Years later, a study that Leszczynski described as a “game changer” discovered that even phones meeting government standards, which in Europe were a SAR of 2.0 watts per kilogram, could deliver exponentially higher peak radiation levels to certain skin and blood cells. (SAR levels reached a staggering 40 watts per kilogram—20 times higher than officially permitted.) In other words, the official safety levels masked dramatically higher exposures in hot spots, but industry-funded scientists obstructed research on the health impacts.

“Everyone knows that if your research results show that radiation has effects, the funding flow dries up,” Leszczynski said in an interview in 2011. Sure enough, the Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority of Finland, where Leszczynski had a long career, discontinued research on the biological effects of cell phones and discharged him a year later.

According to scientists involved in the process, the WHO may decide later this year to reconsider its categorization of the cancer risk posed by cell phones; the WHO itself told The Nation that before making any such decision, it will review the final report of the National Toxicology Program, a US government initiative. The results reported by the NTP in 2016 seem to strengthen the case for increasing the assessment of cell-phone radiation to a “probable” or even a “known” carcinogen. Whereas the WHO’s Interphone study compared the cell-phone usage of people who had contracted cancer with that of people who hadn’t, the NTP study exposed rats and mice to cell-phone radiation and observed whether the animals got sick.

“There is a carcinogenic effect,” announced Ron Melnick, the designer of the study. Male rats exposed to cell-phone radiation developed cancer at a substantially higher rate, though the same effect was not seen in female rats. Rats exposed to radiation also had lower birth rates, higher infant mortality, and more heart problems than those in the control group. The cancer effect occurred in only a small percentage of the rats, but that small percentage could translate into a massive amount of human cancers. “Given the extremely large number of people who use wireless communications devices, even a very small increase in the incidence of disease...could have broad implications for public health,” the NTP’s draft report explained.

But this was not the message that media coverage of the NTP study conveyed, as the industry blanketed reporters with its usual “more research is needed” spin. “Seriously, stop with the irresponsible reporting on cell phones and cancer,” demanded a Vox headline. “Don’t Believe the Hype,” urged The Washington Post. Newsweek, for its part, stated the NTP’s findings in a single paragraph, then devoted the rest of the article to an argument for why they should be ignored.

The NTP study will be peer-reviewed at a closed-door meeting on March 26–28, amid signs that the program’s leadership is pivoting to downplay its findings. The NTP had issued a public-health warning when the study’s early results were released in 2016. But when the NTP released essentially the same data in February 2018, John Bucher, the senior scientist who directed the study, announced in a telephone press conference that “I don’t think this is a high-risk situation at all,” partly because the study had exposed the rats and mice to higher levels of radiation than a typical cell-phone user experienced.

Microwave News’s Slesin speculated on potential explanations for the NTP’s apparent backtracking: new leadership within the program, where a former drug-company executive, Brian Berridge, now runs the day-to-day operations; pressure from business-friendly Republicans on Capitol Hill and from the US military, whose weapons systems rely on wireless radiation; and the anti-science ideology of the Trump White House. The question now: Will the scientists doing the peer review endorse the NTP’s newly ambivalent perspective, or challenge it?

The scientific evidence that cell phones and wireless technologies in general can cause cancer and genetic damage is not definitive, but it is abundant and has been increasing over time. Contrary to the impression that most news coverage has given the public, 90 percent of the 200 existing studies included in the National Institute of Health’s PubMed database on the oxidative effects of wireless radiation—its tendency to cause cells to shed electrons, which can lead to cancer and other diseases—have found a significant impact, according to a survey of the scientific literature conducted by Henry Lai. Seventy-two percent of neurological studies and 64 percent of DNA studies have also found effects.

The wireless industry’s determination to bring about the Internet of Things, despite the massive increase in radiation exposure this would unleash, raises the stakes exponentially. Because 5G radiation can only travel short distances, antennas roughly the size of a pizza box will have to be installed approximately every 250 feet to ensure connectivity. “Industry is going to need hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of new antenna sites in the United States alone,” said Moskowitz, the UC Berkeley researcher. “So people will be bathed in a smog of radiation 24/7.”

There is an alternative approach, rooted in what some scientists and ethicists call the “precautionary principle,” which holds that society doesn’t need absolute proof of hazard to place limits on a given technology. If the evidence is sufficiently solid and the risks sufficiently great, the precautionary principle calls for delaying the deployment of that technology until further research clarifies its impacts. The scientists’ petition discussed earlier urges government regulators to apply the precautionary principle to 5G technology. Current safety guidelines “protect industry—not health,” contends the petition, which “recommend[s] a moratorium on the roll-out of [5G]...until potential hazards for human health and the environment have been fully investigated by scientists independent from industry.”

No scientist can say with certainty how many wireless-technology users are likely to contract cancer, but that is precisely the point: We simply don’t know. Nevertheless, we are proceeding as if we do know the risk, and that the risk is vanishingly small. Meanwhile, more and more people around the world, including millions of children and adolescents, are getting addicted to cell phones every day, and the shift to radiation-heavy 5G technology is regarded as a fait accompli. Which is just how Big Wireless likes it.
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When Indigenous women are harassed at work, gaps in tribal law can leave them in a precarious gray area.

by REBECCA CLARREN and JASON BEGAY

When Amber Kanazbah Crotty first went to work for the Navajo Nation, she was full of hope. She was passionate about education and health care, and wanted to help break the cycle of poverty that bound many Navajo families. Crotty hails from a long line of feisty women who, she says, “come from the land,” a reference to the arid ocher soil of the Navajo Nation and another way of saying: Her people are tough. Crotty studied American Indian law and history at the University of California, Los Angeles; she returned to Navajo and, with two young daughters at home, went to work as a legislative aide to a delegate in the Navajo Nation Council. Then, on a work trip several years ago, something happened that left her overwhelmed with doubt.

It was evening. Crotty and two other legislative aides were in a casino, encouraging their superior, a Navajo councilman, to stop drinking and return to his room so that he’d be prepared for his flight the next morning. Laughing, the councilman lunged at Crotty, stuck his hand up her shirt, and groped her breasts. Shaken, Crotty left the casino floor immediately.

Two of Crotty’s former co-workers say that she talked to them about the incident shortly after it occurred. But when she reported the incident to a supervisor, Crotty says, he shrugged it off and told her that it was beyond his pay grade. This was devastating, but, as other staffers who worked for the council at the time confirmed, not unusual. Another former aide said that nothing had been done after she’d complained of a councilman routinely texting her flirtatious messages late at night. Crotty had seen still another councilman looking at pictures of naked women on his iPad during committee meetings. “We didn’t feel like we could say something—not if we wanted to keep our jobs,” says Crotty, who is now 39. Sexual harassment in her workplace had been so normalized that most incidents passed unmentioned. “The silence was deafening,” Crotty recalls.

The extraordinarily high rates of violence against Native people have been well-documented: More than half of all American Indian and Alaskan Native women have experienced sexual violence, according to a National Institute of Justice–funded study in 2016. A related but little-reported problem involves sexual harassment and assault in tribal governments and businesses, which are usually the primary employers for Native people on reservations, and whose leadership positions are dominated by men. There are no comprehensive data on the prevalence of abuse in tribal workplaces, but Crotty and other national advocates for Indigenous women say they hear reports of such abuse regularly. LeAndra Bitsie, the chief executive of IML Training, has conducted leadership training sessions for some 150 tribal governments; she says that the issue
of sexual harassment comes up often. A survey by the tribal newspaper of Oklahoma’s Muscogee (Creek) Nation this past October found that, of the poll’s 32 respondents, 25 percent said they were victims of sexual harassment in the tribe’s workplaces, and more than 40 percent said they had personally witnessed instances of sexual harassment.

Our review of all electronically searchable tribal-court cases involving sex discrimination indicates that the incidents alleged by Crotty and other Native women are not unlike the kinds of workplace harassment reported by women in other industries: Bosses made sexually explicit comments or coerced employees into sexual encounters; employees slapped female co-workers on the buttocks or casually groped their breasts; women felt passed over for jobs because of their gender or were fired after reporting sexual harassment.

But there are unique circumstances that make it particularly difficult for Native women who work for their tribes to report and end harassment. As a nod to tribal sovereignty, Congress exempted tribes from Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act, the provision that prohibits sex discrimination, including sexual harassment and assault, in the workplace. After consulting legal databases, journal articles, and research by legal experts Ann Tweedy and Kaighn Smith Jr., we found only 17 tribes—out of the 367 that are federally recognized—that have electronically searchable laws explicitly prohibiting sex discrimination in the workplace. Of those, six have adopted measures that apply only to employees of gaming enterprises. (The states of California and New Mexico have signed gaming compacts with most tribes in those states requiring the protection of tribal-casino employees from sexual harassment and assault.) At least three other tribes have broad anti-harassment codes that don’t explicitly mention sexual harassment and are not specific to an employment context.

Although the Navajo Nation does have a law prohibiting the harassment of its members, until 2016 the definition was vague and the law didn’t specifically mention sexual harassment. That may at least partly explain why, in the six cases we found in tribes and further diminish us? How do you find your healing and hold people accountable when the message since 1491 has been to stay together, that the enemies are not in the home or in the community but on the outside? It takes a lot of bravery to disclose abuse and break that code of silence.”

Crotty and others trace much of the sexism that occurs today in Indian country to colonization. When representatives of the United States created treaties with the tribes, they consulted mostly with the men, and they appointed leaders—almost always men—to run systems modeled on American democracy. For instance, the Navajo Treaty of 1868—the agreement that established the Navajo as a federally recognized tribe and created their reservation—states that decisions about land ownership would be considered valid only if agreed to by “three-fourths of all the adult male Indians.” But Navajo culture has traditionally been matrilineal: Children are born into and identify with their mother’s clan. When people married, they moved into the wife’s home and herded animals belonging to her family.

“Patriarchy and gender discrimination aren’t part of traditional belief systems for most Native tribes,” says Sarah Deer, a University of Kansas professor of women, gender, and sexuality studies and the author of *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America.* “You don’t want to romanticize tribal cultures and say there was never gender bias, but with very few exceptions the hierarchical paradigm of men on top and women on the bottom is inconsistent with the cosmologies of most Native peoples.”

The introduction of Christianity further reinforced this hierarchical paradigm, Deer continues, promoting men as the head of the household. The boarding schools to which all Native children were sent during the late 19th century—a practice that continued well into the 20th—not only subjected many students to routine physical and sexual abuse but reinforced the economic disparities between men and women by training male students in trades like welding while teaching women how to sew and bake—skills with less earning power.
Today, entrenched sexist attitudes have led to discrimination in many forms, including a gender wage gap. According to the National Women’s Law Center, fully employed Navajo women make about 81 percent of what Navajo men do, and just 51 percent of the earnings of white men. Women from other tribes, including the Choctaw and Pueblo, experience an even starker disparity. (These statistics include workers employed in both tribal and nontribal businesses.) When one executive for a Pacific Northwest tribe investigated the salaries of the past four people to hold her job, she found that the men were paid approximately 30 percent more than the women.

“I was so mad, I thought my head was going to spin off,” says the manager, who requested anonymity out of a fear that she’d be fired for speaking to the press. “You didn’t need to even say, ‘The council discriminates against women’—it was blatant. The numbers were there to prove it.” Still, she was afraid that if she initiated a lawsuit, she would endanger not only her own job but her partner’s, as well as the rental home they lease from the tribe—and since they live in a rural area, the opportunities for other employment or housing are scarce. (After appealing to the tribal council, the woman did eventually receive a pay raise.)

In the wake of harassment, native people often feel they have to choose between protecting themselves and protecting their tribe. Dode Barnett, a former councilwoman of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, experienced this bind personally after a colleague allegedly slapped her on the buttocks and shouted “Woo!” while they were working in the National Council office. Barnett was shocked and humiliated, but she worried that filing a formal complaint would jeopardize passage of the legislation she had drafted to improve tribal schools—and she also worried about hurting her tribe’s reputation. The decision to stay silent, she says, was a simple one: “I love my people. It was very much in the forefront of my mind that anything I put out there could hurt my tribe, in that people would perceive us more negatively than they already do.”

But Barnett says she did confront her alleged harasser, Lucian Tiger, privately, and in the months that followed felt ostracized by some of her colleagues. Then, in 2017, Barnett was herself accused of harassing tribal employees, which she believes was part of a larger campaign against her led by Tiger, who had been promoted to council speaker in the interim. (Tiger did not respond to requests for comment.) Later that year, Barnett finally did speak publicly about her experience in an interview with the tribal newspaper, Muskoke Media. After the story was published, the tribal administration responded with a memo saying that it doesn’t tolerate harassment. The Muscogee government does have a law that explicitly prohibits sexual harassment, but its strength and effectiveness depend on how it’s enforced.

For many tribal members, filing a complaint or disclosing abuse to the media involves huge personal risk. Deleana OtherBull, executive director of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women, says she hears about sexual harassment from Indigenous women almost every day, and yet the vast majority of them are afraid to speak up—especially if a tribal leader is involved. “For a lot of women, making a complaint could mean not only losing their job, but losing their housing or their children’s college scholarship, or their partner could be fired.” We’ve seen women who have spoken out being asked to leave their community, to have to move away,” OtherBull said.

As a result, many women rely on Indian country’s whisper network to share stories and protect one another from known perpetrators. In a blog post titled “The Native Harvey Weinsteins,” Brown University professor Adrienne Keene described, without naming names, the “shit” so many Native women have experienced at the hands of “our ‘famous Indians.’” “We tell ourselves that [sexual harassment] is ok. That we have so few representations in the mainstream we don’t want to hurt their reputations. That they do ‘good work,’” wrote Keene, whose post has been shared more than 10,000 times since it was published last October. “We struggle so much to be more than stereotypes. There’s a fear that if we talk about these issues, we fall back on any progress we’ve made.”

In the nearly two years since Crotty stood up in that council meeting, the Navajo Nation has made changes to the way it deals with harassment. Within two weeks of Crotty’s speech, the Navajo president signed an executive order requiring anti-harassment training for all executive and judicial employees. At least seven local community governments are drafting resolutions or planning initiatives aimed at eliminating sexual harassment in the workplace. Crotty says she’s noticed less victim-blaming in the conversations about harassment. Other former aides say it’s becoming less frightening to talk about workplace abuse. Still, anti-harassment training remains optional for legislators. Crotty is working on a bill to amend the tribal code and more clearly define sexual harassment and assault; to help potential victims recognize troubling behavior; to stiffen the penalties for people found guilty of violations; and to make it easier to report harassment.

Without the leadership of women like Crotty, many tribes are still struggling to address sexism in the work-
place. Many face severe budget shortfalls, making it difficult to draft new laws. In this void, personnel policies and procedures can be effective, says Judy Wright, president of the National Native American Human Resources Association, particularly if they include clear definitions of sex discrimination, as well as training and enforcement measures. Our analysis of electronically searchable court cases indicates that, while some tribal courts have upheld the termination of employees accused of sexual harassment on the basis of personnel policies, others have found such policies inadequate or determined that, without a specific law, they have no jurisdiction.

When women do find the courage to report harassment—and when laws exist to make such action worthwhile—finding legal representation as a tribal member can be challenging. Most reservations are in rural places with limited access to attorneys, and many attorneys experienced in Indian law work for tribal governments, meaning that a conflict of interest may prevent them from representing individual members.

Beyond its implications for individual rights, the failure of tribal governments to protect against abuse in the workplace is a threat to the tribes themselves, says Kaighn Smith Jr., author of Labor and Employment Law in Indian Country, because it leaves them “vulnerable to being viewed as ‘lawless enclaves.’” In the absence of enforceable laws, reports of widespread sex discrimination invite Congress to impose federal laws, which would be anathema to tribal sovereignty. “If women suffer sexual harassment in the workplace without any ability to get a remedy, the legitimacy of tribal government can be called into question,” Smith says.

Lucy Simpson, executive director of the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center, argues that in order to be successful, anti-harassment strategies must be devised within tribal communities, with an eye toward traditional values and customs. If tribes simply “cut and paste” policies developed elsewhere, they won’t resonate. “To combat sexual harassment and all forms of gender-based violence, we need to reclaim our Native values of cooperation, trust, personal AND community accountability, and restore the understanding that women are sacred,” Simpson wrote in an e-mail. That might require tribes to overhaul their governments entirely, says Jennifer Denetdale, an associate professor of American studies at the University of New Mexico and chair of the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission. She explains that the current gender hierarchy of tribal governments rarely reflects traditional tribal values. “Until we change that governing structure to acknowledge the role of women in our tribe. It’s a dramatic change.”
In December 1945, Ezra Pound was committed to St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC. He was then 60 years old, internationally famous, and under indictment for treason against the United States. In an infamous series of broadcasts made on Italian radio between 1941 and 1943, Pound had declared his support for Mussolini’s regime and his contempt for the Allied forces. He parroted fascist talking points but also added a layer of byzantine anti-Semitic conspiracy theory all his own. “You let in the Jew and the Jew rotted your empire, and you yourselves out-Jewed the Jew,” he admonished the British on March 15, 1942. In other broadcasts, Pound spoke of “Jew slime,” warned of the white race “going toward total extinction,” suggested hanging President Roosevelt (“if you can do it by due legal process”), praised Hitler’s Mein Kampf, and urged his listeners to familiarize themselves with The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Pound had arrived at this vicious ideological position gradually. His early work, while always concerned with the relations between art and society, had rarely been political per se. Over the years, though, his long poem The Cantos, started in 1915, had drifted from a preoccupation with mythological subjects to an investigation of economics and governance, influenced by heterodox economists like C.H. Douglas and Silvio Gesell. By the time the Second World War began, Pound had come to blame the practice of usury, propagated by a secret network of nefarious Jewish bankers, for all the evils afflicting the world.
After relocating to Italy in 1924, Pound became an ardent supporter of Mussolini, who he believed shared his economic views. He collaborated with the regime right up until the fall of the Nazi-backed Republic of Salò in April 1945, when he turned himself in to American military officials, and spent months in a detention center in Pisa before being extradited to the United States and eventually institutionalized at St. Elizabeths, the nation's oldest federally funded mental hospital.

At first, access to Pound was sharply restricted. For 13 months, he was held at Howard Hall, the hospital's maximum-security ward for the violent and criminally insane, an area enclosed by a 22-foot concrete perimeter wall. Over time, however, these restrictions were loosened. In early 1947, Pound was moved to Center Building, a less fortified area, and granted more leeway in receiving visitors. He had been, by this point, a driving force in modernist cultural circles for over three decades, and many American writers he had helped or influenced were eager to visit him.

Some of the guests were old friends from the heyday of high modernism, like T.S. Eliot (with whom he played tennis), Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. But he also attracted a legion of younger poets eager to pay their respects, including Charles Olson, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Louis Zukofsky, Elizabeth Bishop, W.S. Merwin, and Frederick Seidel. Eventually, Pound was granted permission to spend his days out on the lawn, lecturing to a group of eager young disciples who dubbed themselves “Ezrologists.” “It was the world’s least orthodox literary salon,” Daniel Swift writes in his elegant and provocative new book, The Bughouse: The Poetry, Politics, and Madness of Ezra Pound, “convened by a fascist, held in a lunatic asylum.”

Most of the writers who visited Pound at St. Elizabeths wrote about it, and a good portion of Swift’s book is given over to analysis of a curious literary subgenre he calls “the Tale of the Bughouse Visit.” (“The Bughouse” was Pound’s own preferred term for his environs.) The most famous instance is probably Bishop’s poem “Visits to St Elizabeths,” which borrows the iterative structure of the nursery rhyme “The House That Jack Built” to describe a man portrayed variously as “tragic,” “talkative,” “honored,” “brave,” “cranky,” “cruel,” “busy,” “tedious,” and “wretched.” But the hospital also finds its way into Williams’s Paterson, Olson’s The Maximus Poems, Berryman’s Dream Songs, Lowell’s sonnet “Ezra Pound,” and Seidel’s “Glory,” not to mention assorted autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and other prose accounts.

It wasn’t only literary types who frequented or wrote about St. Elizabeths, however. Even as his writer friends were celebrating his literary accomplishments, Pound was attracting new adherents from the American far right. One of the most devoted of the Ezrologists was a young man named Eustace Mullins, an anti-Semite and conspiracy theorist who later became a prominent Holocaust denier. At Pound’s instigation, Mullins began work on a book called A Study of the Federal Reserve, which, according to Swift, “rectours the dastardly founding of the Fed in a plot against the spirit of Jefferson and the principles of American democracy…backed by the Rothschilds.”

Another protégé was John Kasper, the owner of a bookstore in Greenwich Village specializing in racist and anti-Semitic literature. (“He’d named it Make It New, after one of Pound’s most famous critical pronouncements.) Later, Kasper became a leading figure in the right-wing reaction to the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision. In 1956, he founded the Seaboard White Citizens Council and issued propaganda that reads like a bad parody of Pound’s own fulminations:

Now damn all race-mixers
The stink: Roose, Harry and Ike
God bless Jeff
Jax and John Adams
Also Abe
Loathe carpet-bag
Despise scalawag
Hate mongrelizer

In 1957, Kasper was arrested for inciting a riot against the desegregation of Nashvile schools. The New York Herald Tribune reported on Kasper’s connection to Pound, and his friends Archibald MacLeish and Ernest Hemingway worried the link would further damage Pound’s reputation. But “Pound welcomed Kasper in and never denied his association,” Swift writes. “He stayed loyal to that which damaged him.” In fact, at the same time, Pound himself was publishing pseudonymous journalism on similar themes. “It is perfectly well known that the fuss about ‘de-segregation’ in the United States has been started by Jews,” he wrote in August 1956.

The period of Pound’s institutionalization at St. Elizabeths also marked the beginning of the rehabilitation of his literary reputation. Friends and admirers like Eliot and James Laughlin, Pound’s publisher, couldn’t deny his commitments to fascism and anti-Semitism, so they sought to downplay them by shifting attention to his poetic innovations. This project was aided by the rise of the New Criticism in American universities, which insisted on the excision of biographical, historical, and ideological concerns from the evaluation and interpretation of literature.

This campaign worked well enough in literary circles, but it was less effective with the general public and the legal establishment, both of which were keen to hold Pound accountable for his wartime activities. Here, another strategy was necessary. Pound had clearly forfeited the role he’d long cultivated, as the visionary leader of a political and cultural vanguard. But perhaps he could be presented as another, equally familiar archetype: the brilliant poet touched by madness.

Was Pound really mentally ill? Or had he been faking it all along? In his influential The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secret of St. Elizabeths (1984), the psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey claimed that Pound’s lawyer, Julien Cornell, in cahoots with Dr. Winfred Overholser, the superintendent of St. Elizabeths, conspired to present an eccentric and egocentric but essentially sane individual as a madman in order to preserve his reputation and, possibly, save his life.

It’s true that, if convicted, Pound could well have faced the death penalty: A number of fascist and Nazi collaborators, including Britain’s William Joyce, Norway’s Vidkun Quisling, and France’s Pierre Laval, were executed for treason by their home countries. Cornell decided early on that having his client declared mentally unfit to stand trial was the wisest course. The gambit worked: The jury at Pound’s sanity hearing took only four minutes to decide that the poet was “of unsound mind.”

The price of Pound’s survival, as Swift sees it, was a public renunciation of his authority as a writer and thinker. Having spent decades setting himself up as an expert not only in literature but in politics, economics, history, anthropology, and Sinology, among other fields, Pound was now admitting that he lacked the mental competence to stand trial. The Cantos was meant to be a poem containing history” that synthesized all Pound knew and believed into an epic
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masterpiece that would help put civilization on the right track in the 20th century. Now it was used as an exhibit demonstrating its author’s incoherence.

Before Pound’s sanity hearing, Cornell presented extracts from *The Cantos* that the poet had composed during his incarceration in Pisa to four expert psychiatrists as “evidence of his mental condition.” On the stand, one of them, Dr. Wendell Mun-cie, testified that, on the evidence of this and Pound’s other writings, he judged that “there has been for a number of years a de-terioration of the mental processes.” Here was Pound’s own putative masterpiece held up as proof of his disintegration.

Though Swift doesn’t mention it in *The Bughouse*, some major paradigm shifts within the American political and medi-cal communities helped to establish the conditions under which the Pound defense was possible. In their recent study *Are Rac-ists Crazy?*, Sander L. Gilman and James M. Thomas show how, during the early decades of the 20th century, racism and anti-Semitism began to be regarded more and more as pathological conditions. While psychology had earlier focused on the sup-posed irrationality and moral degeneracy of nonwhite races, utilizing theories that often harmonized with Pound’s own, the disci-pline gradually shifted, especially as details of the Nazi Holocaust began to emerge, and came to see racism as itself a psycho-logical problem. The theories of émigré psychoanalysts like Erich Fromm, Erik H. Erikson, and Wilhelm Reich, who re-garded racism, fascism, and anti-Semitism as symptoms of arrested development or sexual repression, only helped to confirm this notion. “[I]f the nineteenth-century Jew and black American bore the mark of insanity,” Gilman and Thomas write, “by the end of World War II that mark would be placed upon those whose hatred targeted the Jew and black American.”

Over the course of *The Cantos*’ decades-long composition, then, Pound’s prejudices went from being considered acceptable, if not exactly commonplace, by cosmopolitan elites to being considered morally odious, if not insane. (One need only compare the way anti-Semitic references disappear from the later poetry of Pound’s friend and protégé Eliot to see an index of this change.) In a strange way, Pound benefited from this midcentury lurch in elite public opinion away from racism and anti-Semitism: It was now much easier to cite his fervent espousal of such ideas as evidence of mental illness. Anyone as passionately and consistently full of hatred as Pound, the argument went, must be insane.

The insanity defense may have saved Pound’s life, but it has created perma-nent difficulties for assessing his liter-ary achievement and, for that mat-ter, reckoning with his politics. The simplest courses are to denounce Pound’s work in total (easy enough to do, particularly for critics who were already hostile or indifferent to modernism) or to bracket its ideological content, suspending judgment and even, in many cases, understanding. (This, too, can be seen as a by-product of Cornell’s insanity defense: If Pound’s racism is merely a symptom of his madness, why bother to track its logic or try to compre-hend its appeal?)

While a great deal of excellent scholar-ship has been published on Pound’s fascism, there is still a tendency among those who study him to minimize or ignore his politics. Of his visit to the 2013 Ezra Pound Interna-tional Conference (EPIC) in Dublin, Swift reports: “I hear ‘versifier’ used as a term of abuse, and an hour-long elucidation of three lines of a fragment. I hear an awful lot of gos-sip about long-dead literary editors. I hear no mention of fascism or anti-Semitism.”

Swift is a Poundian: He is clearly some-one who admires Pound’s work and finds it worth grappling with, in spite of its political and moral ugliness. *The Bughouse* is not only a work of historical research and criticism; it has something of the character of a personal homage. Swift’s own visits to St. Elizabeths and other significant locales in Pound’s life are described in such detail that they seem like pilgrimages as much as research trips, and he allows himself to follow tangents (about Pound’s fashion sense, his love of tennis, his ancestor’s interest in wireless tele-graphy) that attest more to Swift’s immers-ion in Poundian ephemera than anything else. The book is also full of sensitive, gen-erous readings of Pound’s poetry, from the early lyrics collected in *Personae* to thornier passages from the late *Cantos*. Swift is par-ticularly good on Pound’s “Elizabethan” writings: the works actually composed at St. Elizabeths, including the cantos eventually published in 1955 as *Section: Rock-Drill* and the translations of Sophocles’ tragedies and the odes of Confucius, which, Swift nicely demonstrates, “encode the sensations of the hospital” and catalog its flora and fauna.

But Swift, to his credit, doesn’t shy away from the aspects of Pound that are infuriating, disturbing, or unacceptable. Virtually everyone is prepared to admit that Pound was a fascist, a racist, and an anti-Semite; what’s harder to accept is that his political views are not incidental but central to the poetic project that constitu-ted his life’s work. “The grand bad faith of the *Cantos*—its pomposity, its anger—is a constant, running line after line,” Swift notes. He also recognizes that there is something more at stake here than just literary reputation. Pound is not the only major 20th-century literary figure who supported fascism or held racist views; but he is the only one who engaged with the extreme right of the postwar era, and today his particular blend of economic populism, conspiracy thinking, and overt racism, far from seeming eccentric and anachronistic, is disturbingly contemporary. We hardly need reminding, in these days of resur-gent white nationalism, that many of the noxious ideas Pound advocated are far from extinct.

At one point, Swift travels to Rome to talk with members of CasaPound, an Italian neofascist organization that draws inspira-tion from Pound’s work and makes use of his name and image in its propaganda. “They call themselves ‘i ragazzi di Ezra’—Ezra’s boys,” he reports. While Pound’s influence is less visible on the American alt-right scene, it isn’t difficult to trace the lines of in-tellectual genealogy, via the likes of Eustace Mullins and John Kasper, to the present-day demagogues who headlined the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, such as Richard Spencer, Christopher Cantwell, and Augustus Sol Invictus. (Invictus, in particular, seems to be a Pound aficionado: He has called him “my American fellow fascist” and uploaded his own recitations of Pound’s poetry to YouTube.) If Pound were alive and writing today, who knows what company he’d keep?

Pound was released from St. Elizabeths in May 1958, 13 years after he went in. There are at least two ways to tell this story. The more famous one is that Pound’s release constituted a kind of unofficial pardon: It was the result of a long campaign on his behalf by luminar-ies like Robert Frost, Frank Lloyd Wright, Igor Stravinsky, and Hemingway. (After he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954, Hemingway was quoted as saying, “This would be a good year to release poets.”) This explanation is the obvious one from the point of view of literary history: The significance of modernism was, by the late 1950s, practically dogma among US elites, and Pound, whatever his sins, was un-
Swift, though, provides a counternarrative that is, in its way, equally convincing. Pound’s 13-year institutionalization, he points out, coincided with an epochal shift in the treatment of mental illness in the United States. St. Elizabeths, the first federally operated mental hospital in the country, had been constructed in the 1850s as part of a movement to provide “moral treatment” to the insane, an improvement upon the hellish asylum conditions common in the first half of the 19th century and earlier. The hospital’s “design casts in bricks and wood a theory of care,” Swift writes. “The grounds were therapy.” But by the time Pound was discharged, in the late 1950s, Overholser was declaring psychiatry to be on “the verge of a new era in the treatment of mental disorder...a pharmacological era.” The prescription of psychotropic drugs like chlorpromazine and reserpine was becoming more routine; by 1957, close to half of the patients at St. Elizabeths were taking them. The medical paradigm was shifting away from institutionalization and toward medication. Americans were becoming more willing to accept that the mentally ill, properly tranquilized, could be integrated into society.

In this interpretation, Pound was less a special case singled out for his cultural significance than just one of the many patients affected by what historians of psychiatry call “deinstitutionalization.” “Where once [St. Elizabeths] had been a castle, fortified and apart, now in an era of pharmacological cures and community treatment, its walls were dissolving,” Swift writes. When Pound announced, upon his return to Italy, that “all America is an insane asylum,” this is probably not what he meant.

There is still a fundamental inconsistency, Swift suggests, in how we view Pound. He ended up in St. Elizabeths because his friends were able to convince a jury that a poet of such sensibility and intelligence who said the things he said and wrote the things he wrote must be crazy. But to adopt this same attitude to Pound’s legacy—as Swift convinces us we largely have—is both to let him off the hook morally and to limit our engagement with his writing to a sterile formalism. The Bughouse doesn’t provide a solution to this dilemma; it doesn’t even offer a new way of seeing Pound. But it does insist on contradictions in our common response to ideas like his that no scholar of modernism, and no citizen of the United States, can currently afford to overlook. It is, after all, no longer impossible to imagine a country where an Ezra Pound, after years in the wilderness, might suddenly appear reasonable, and where we—the believers in tolerance, equality, and democracy, or so we like to think—are the ones who belong in the bughouse.

Fable of the Firstborn

In the beginning, I was neither image nor identity. Time was a quickening; I was my own dark-watered well. There was no hankering there, just another native world and its wishes. Who is Memory? Why does she matter to History? Their far-off laughter uncurled me—I stretched out to hear more closely.

In the beginning, I was born a man-girl with teeth for toes and a headful of hair hiding the nubs of horns. This was before ally or self-portrait, prodigal performer or forgotten prop. Soon, I was collecting sounds I mimicked at my elders’ commands to avoid my own noise. I found myself hiding in a closet beside bags of clothes only the dead would wear.

Isn’t that why you’re here? In the end, there’s only one way to begin an origin story: at the beginning. I know a good one: a monster named Joy-in-the-Margins learns the nature of light by revising the dark into song with every register of her seven tongues. Ready? Let’s begin. Verse 0. Surah 1.

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WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE POLICE?

Two new books examine the austerity policies and administrative overreach behind the expansion of local law enforcement

by E. TAMMY KIM

I live in New York, a city patrolled by some 35,000 uniformed police officers. Yet beat cops and cruisers are not a meaningful part of my life. I encounter the police as a passerby, and interact with them only as I would a plumber or locksmith. They are on call to solve problems; they appear on command and leave when their work is done. My experience with the police is notably distant from that of Franklyn, a 20-year-old I met last November in our shared borough of Brooklyn. Raised in low-income sections of East Flatbush and Crown Heights, Franklyn has had many encounters with the police; they are less often plumbers or locksmiths than wardens—omnipresent and omnipotent. “There’s a reason we have policing in the first place, but I believe we stepped away from that reason and started building something that doesn’t match the initial plan,” he told me. “When you’re bothering people in the lobby of their own building or stopping someone in front of their own house, that becomes unnecessary.”

Our conversation took place after a panel at Brooklyn College, where Franklyn is a student. The event marked the publi-


The End of Policing
By Alex S. Vitale
Verso. 272 pp. $26.95

Unwarranted
Policing Without Permission
By Barry Friedman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 448 pp. $28
cation of a new book, *The End of Policing*, by Alex S. Vitale, a sociologist at the college. Vitale squared off against Heather Mac Donald, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute and the author of *The War on Cops: How the New Attack on Law and Order Makes Everyone Less Safe*. To a largely black and brown audience, Mac Donald argued that contemporary policing isn’t racist; rather, it is driven by objective data on where crimes occur. Racially disproportionate stop-and-frisk rates, she asserted, are evidence not of bias but of a population in crisis: delinquency and a broken family structure, especially absentee dads. Just ask the minority residents of troubled housing units, she added. They are “begging” for more police.

There are many ways one might reply to Mac Donald. Vitale did so with the central argument of his book: that most poor people are in fact begging for less police. What they really want, he said, are living-wage jobs, affordable health care, adequate sanitation, and decent permanent housing. Despite the “end” in its title, Vitale’s book doesn’t make a case for the complete abolition of law enforcement; it merely rejects the notion that the police can and should solve every social problem. Vitale blames trickle-down economics, austerity politics, redlining, and deunionization for producing the conditions of crime. What if we funded counselors instead of cops in our public schools? What if we hired doormen instead of uniformed officers to tend the lobbies of public-housing towers? What if we invested in mental-health treatment and gang-interruption programs instead of in billion-dollar law-enforcement facilities, like the new 32-acre Police Academy in Queens?

By asking such unglamorous questions on budgets and personnel, Vitale hopes to recast the conversation about the police. Black Lives Matter has provoked a critical reevaluation of law enforcement, but the response by policy-makers and analysts has too often hinged on small-bore, technocratic recipes for reform. It is tempting, and often appropriate, to change how police officers are hired, what they wear, which weapons they carry, where they conduct patrols, or how their actions are recorded. But there are more than 18,000 local law-enforcement agencies in the United States, and no national set of training standards, use-of-force guidelines, ethics rules, or centralized statistics on so-called “officer-involved shootings.” Given this unwieldy picture, no combination of tweaked inter-

The End of Policing offers a compelling digest of the dynamics of crime and law enforcement, and a polemic against the militarization of everything. Eight of its 10 short chapters focus on vulnerable groups whose problems have been deemed fixable by the police. Students, poor people, drug users, sex workers, people with mental illness, people without stable housing, gang members, protesters, and immigrants—they are all the targets not of social services, but of criminal laws and armed personnel. In the chapter on mental illness, Vitale tells the story of Jason Harrison, whose mother called 911 after her son refused to take his medication. “When police arrived, she casually walked outside, followed by her son, who was carrying a screwdriver. When the officer saw him, he began yelling commands to drop it and within seconds opened fire,” Vitale writes.

Such fatal interactions—many, like Harrison’s, caught on video—have spurred thousands of police departments to invest in crisis-intervention training, jail-based diversion programs, and interdisciplinary response teams. But these reforms, Vitale argues, leave intact the framing of psychiatric crisis as a “public-order problem.” Why was calling 911 the only option available to Harrison’s mother? (Tragically, she even told the dispatcher, “He has bipolar schizophrenia…make sure they’re trained police officers.”) Why must the police perform tasks outside their discipline? And why, Vitale asks repeatedly, are they “the gatekeepers” of health care, housing, and other basic services? How did cops become gun-wielding caseworkers in what the sociologist Forrest Stuart has called a regime of “therapeutic policing”?

Just as no police recruit fantasizes about de-escalating psychiatric crises, most officers would rather work on serious crimes than make traffic stops or low-level marijuana arrests. Yet this is precisely what the prevailing approach of “broken windows,” quality-of-life, or zero-tolerance policing insists they prioritize. For Vitale, the coupling of “broken windows” and the War on Drugs encapsulates the excesses of local law enforcement. City cops working drug crimes now spend much of their workday “looking for easy drug arrests in poor minority neighborhoods.” In New York, for instance, after the city decriminalized some pot-related offenses in the late 1970s, the NYPD reprioritized marijuana arrests as part of a strategy of asserting strict control over the public lives of young people of color. In conjunction with the widespread use of “stop, question, and frisk” practices, the police were stopping a growing number of young people and in many cases asking them to “empty their pockets.” As a result, marijuana possession arrests jumped from almost nothing to fifty thousand a year, resulting in the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of people.

Protests and litigation have recently forced a reckoning with this strategy, but the damage to community relations may be irreparable. Poor neighborhoods have long been overregulated for minor infractions and underregulated for homicides, a point made dramatically in Jill Leovy’s book *Ghettoside*, about detective work in South Los Angeles. For Vitale, a defender of the welfare state, the great tragedy of this scenario is that, among America’s underclass, the very face of government “is the police officer, engaged primarily in punitive enforcement actions.”

What is to be done? Each of Vitale’s chapters prescribes a variation on the same theme: “Give the cops fewer things to do, and reallocate the money accordingly.” In my own reporting over the past few years, “the police do too much” has emerged as a collective creed, the only perspective shared by officers, Black Lives Matter activists, and criminologists alike. Nevertheless, many cities, counties, and towns continue to earmark nearly half of their budgets for law enforcement. And while some police commissioners and union heads have lobbied for increases in homeless and mental-health services, I have yet
We pay for this unbridled expansion with much more than just our tax dollars. The social costs of the police state are the subject of Unwarranted: Policing Without Permission, a dense but vital book by Barry Friedman, a professor and director of the Policing Project at the New York University School of Law. Friedman, like Vitale, is concerned with police overreach, but he places the blame less on cops than on the rest of us. He argues that we, as a society, have failed to impose basic ex ante standards on local, state, and federal law enforcement. Our calls for police reform, which fixate on civilian-oversight boards, body cameras, and judicial intervention, are inadequate, Friedman says. What we really need are “not reviews but rules: rules that are written before officials act, rules that are public, rules that are written with public participation.”

As it stands, the three branches of government are unwilling to regulate the police. Mayors and governors defer to police chiefs and union presidents; judges make cheesecloth of the Fourth and 14th Amendments; and legislators vote again and again to increase law-enforcement budgets. This arrangement can be traced back to the early days of modern policing, when an unsavory intimacy developed between police departments and the politicians meant to oversee them. “The police became entwined in the sort of municipal graft and corruption that was all too common at the turn of the twentieth century,” Friedman explains. “Cops collected the money that fed the political machine. And so, in order to address that problem, we decided that policing should be separated from politics, and professionalized.” But what was meant to be an insulating moat has since morphed into an inescapable strait, resulting in a lack of oversight, an increasingly endangered search-warrant requirement, and high-tech mass surveillance.

Perhaps the most chilling section of Friedman’s book details the erosion of the constitutional prohibition against “unreasonable searches and seizures.” It is commonly understood that police officers must prove to a judge that a search is necessary before receiving a warrant to conduct one. Yet the exceptions to this rule “now include immigration checkpoints, administrative searches of regulated businesses, ‘consent’ searches, searches of welfare recipients, students, parolees, and government employees, inventory searches, searches of moveable containers, automobile searches, boat searches, fire investigation searches—the list goes on.”

For the police these days, the Fourth Amendment has effectively been revised: go on a fishing expedition first and deal with the pushback later. Similarly, while the notion of a search was once discrete and concrete—the physical examination of a specific locale or person—it is now subsumed under a digital apparatus of data interception, drone-mounted cameras, license-plate readers, and facial-recognition software. “The entire weight of our liberties,” Friedman writes, depends on after-the-fact judicial assessments “of whether what the police did was ‘unreasonable.’”

What we need instead, Friedman insists, is to compel our elected representatives on community boards, city councils, and in state and federal capitols to set the boundaries of policing before the fact. Reference to law and order or strategic concerns need not translate into wholesale authorization. “When police employ invasive technologies, such as drones and heat sensors, that were beyond the wildest imagination of anyone, including the legislators, at the time the general authority was conveyed,” Friedman argues, “it seems entirely plausible to require the government to go back to the legislature and get specific permission.”

Here’s what an established process might have prevented: Between 2009 and 2014, the military gave $18 billion in cash and surplus equipment, including aircraft, grenade launchers, and bayonets, to local police departments and even schools. The 2016 documentary Do Not Resist portrays the full absurdity of these freebies. In one scene, in a neighborhood in Richland County, South Carolina, helmeted men in black riot gear spill out of a vehicle, guns and batons at the ready. They run toward a single-story home, smashing the front windows, tackling a teenager in the yard, and pulling an older man from his car. Once inside the house, they handcuff their suspect, an African-American college student, and allow two women, one clutching an infant to her chest, to take a seat outside.

The officers and their sniffing K-9s scour the premises, but find nothing. “There’s gotta be some drugs here. Where the fuck is the weed?” an officer mumbles in the driveway. His colleague finally comes upon something to justify this expedition: “loose bud” in a knapsack and $876 in landscaping proceeds from the accused’s pocket.

As Friedman notes, local police now deploy their SWAT teams somewhere between 50,000 and 80,000 times a year—compared to just 3,000 in the early 1980s. The raid in Richland County, while a disturbing instance of police overreach, is hardly exceptional. What is unusual is the rather mundane bureaucratic scene that precedes it in Do Not Resist. In Concord, New Hampshire (population 42,900), the City Council meets to consider a $250,000 grant from the Department of Homeland Security. The money would be used to buy a Lenco BearCat—an armored vehicle—at the request of the local police. Residents of the town line up to voice their opinions, which are uniformly opposed. A retired Marine colonel tells his representatives, “You don’t need this. You really don’t…. We’re building an army over here, and I can’t believe that people aren’t seeing it.” A woman begs the City Council to “put things in perspective…. Your chances from dying from a terrorist attack are one in 20 million, so we need to put the brakes on the fear and we need to act rationally.” A protester in the back holds a sign that reads “More Mayberry Less Fallujah.” The council members listen and deliberate, then vote, 11 to four, to take the money.

The town’s purchase of the BearCat is a move neither Friedman nor Vitale would endorse. But Friedman, a process guy, would applaud the dialogue and urge the residents of Concord to vote these 11 council members out of their seats. He offers the example of a 2015 New Jersey bill, sponsored by a Democrat and signed into law by then-Governor
Chris Christie, a Republican, that requires any police department seeking military hardware to first get the approval of local government officials. Since the law went into effect, municipalities across the state have held hearings and taken divergent paths. Some have rejected the militarization of their sheriffs’ offices; others, in flood-prone waterfront communities, have said yes to amphibious tanks.

“It is a sign of a vibrant democracy that—after debate—jurisdictions reach different conclusions,” Friedman asserts. Later in the book, he expands on this point: “In many of the smallest communities in America, we manage to have school boards and zoning boards and other government bodies. If it is possible for this level of civic engagement around libraries, it must be equally possible for law enforcement.”

Vitale doesn’t expressly tackle the question of political process. He’s confident, though, that if we all knew the extent to which policing has infiltrated our lives, we would fight back. Citing Friedman, he writes that “our failure to adequately oversee the actions of police puts our society at peril, especially as new technologies give police the ability to see into ever more aspects of our private lives.”

There is one surveillance technology that has prompted real public debate: police body cameras. Perhaps because their rollout has been so hasty, costly, and widespread, these cameras have become the focus of municipal regulation, public hearings, and academic study. But as Friedman and Vitale contend, the entire universe of policing deserves equal scrutiny. Communities across the United States must continue to push their legislators to establish police-oversight commissions, constrain big-data surveillance, disclose the predictive algorithms used by law enforcement, and scrutinize sheriffs’ pleas for more money. Social movements like Black Lives Matter and the remarkable student uprising against guns must bind their demands to democratic processes—and forge the occasional strategic alliance with progressive police chiefs and district attorneys.

Not since the 1970s have there been so many insistent demands for community control over law enforcement, White House static aside. For now, the end of policing—as either Vitale or Friedman imagines it—may depend less on an ideals-driven abolitionism than on the messy exertions of local politics.

If you can speak of Armando Iannucci’s HBO series Veep and his 2009 movie In the Loop as following a formula in the midst of their flirtations with anarchy—their situations engineered to spin out of control, taking the improvisational performances with them—then you might say that he practices the old knaves-and-fools dialectic: portraying political animals as either skilled, self-involved brutes or bumbling, self-involved imbeciles, but mutually dependent and, in both cases, terrifyingly foul-mouthed. To provide enabling space for this bad behavior, Iannucci also interposes a smattering of middle terms: characters who are reasonably competent and responsible (like you, in other words) but fallible enough to compromise themselves or be fouled up by idiots—and also terrifyingly foul-mouthed.

Having put this formula to work with present-day situations and fictitious characters in his earlier dark comedies, Iannucci now applies it for the first time to a historical incident, involving much higher stakes and a roster of more or less real figures from
1953, including Nikita Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi), Lavrentiy Beria (Simon Russell Beale), Georgy Malenkov (Jeffrey Tambor), and Vyacheslav Molotov (Michael Palin). These are the knaves and fools who party like frat boys, play practical jokes with their food, and tell raucous, blood-drenched stories over dinner to amuse the title monster (Adrian McLoughlin) in The Death of Stalin.

Shot—I mean, photographed—in a steadier and more deep-hued style than In the Loop, with scenes recorded amid significantly more elaborate settings, The Death of Stalin takes a stab—I mean, makes an effort—at conveying the gravity of its subject through an early montage of MVD arrests, interrogations, and murders. To an agitation of Tchai-kovsky on the soundtrack, bulbous sedans roar through the dead of night, sick-faced sons point to the rooms where their fathers are hiding, and, in the background, bodies thud and tumble down staircases. Multiply by a thousand, the montage suggests—by a million. I have seen more dreadful dramatizations of Stalin and Beria’s reign of terror, but I credit Iannucci with presenting this version straight. The trick, though, in keeping with the formula, is to veer back and forth without transition between different types of brutality: on one side tortures and killings, and on the other blatant slapstick.

Iannucci sets the tone by opening in an ornate concert hall, where the musicians onstage are performing an achingly beautiful piano concerto by Mozart, while in the Radio Moscow broadcast booth the engineers are falling over themselves in panic and casting aspersions like mud pies, because Stalin himself has phoned and they don’t know what he wants. You detect a whiff of proud, strained, despairingly useless artistic culture, expelled like stale air from the Soviet balloon that Iannucci has just popped. Before long, the conductor will knock himself cold with a pratfall—that’s how scared he is of Stalin—while the chief radio engineer, forced by a whim of the General Secretary’s to repeat the performance, informs the audience that they are not going home. They will stay, listen again, and applaud. At which instruction, before so much as another note has been played, the music lovers dutifully begin clapping—and, just to make sure, rise to their feet.

So we see the complicity between knaves and fools, the bond between victimizers and victims, which also plays out among the film’s principal characters: the members of the Central Committee. The purest knave among them (apart from the title corpse) is Beria, portrayed by Beale with the round, pince-nez’d suavity of a man who can be utterly reassuring, even genial, in the breath before he orders a woman to be shot in front of her husband. Except for suffering a grisly demise (spoiler alert!), Beria is too vicious to be subjected to slapstick—unlike the Central Committee’s purest fool, Malenkov, whose characterization by Tambor is one long comic indignity of owlish blinks, jowl-shaking stammers, whinnies of inappropriate laughter, and vain adjustments to his dubious hair. Not surprisingly, Malenkov is among the first to make the error, when kneeling beside Stalin’s unconscious form, of dipping his trouser legs into a puddle of urine.

Of course, Iannucci also provides a few middle-term characters—notably the sweethearts of the movie, Stalin’s daughter Svetlana (Andrea Riseborough), whose sincerity and intelligence somehow have not been poisoned by the general indecency, and the movie’s hero, Field Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who is ahistorically trim and chisel-featured as embodied by Jason Isaacs, an actor who always seems to have one lock of hair dangling dashing over an eyebrow, and so provides just the wish fulfillment the audience needs.

But the crucial middle term is Khrushchev, who gradually does something previously unknown for an Iannucci character: change from being a semi-fool into not quite a knave. You will search in vain for anyone adaptable in Veep or In the Loop, anyone with a hint of an inner life that might overflow his or her function in the plot. You might not expect such a character in this movie, either, when you first see Buscemi braying like a buffoon as Khrushchev, with his signature baggy suit and hockey oval of a bald spot. He, too, manages to soak his knees in piss, and (worse than Malenkov) does it while still dressed in his pajamas. But then, as the jockeying for power begins, something takes hold in the man.

Partly it’s Khrushchev’s realization that he’s out of options: He can either act boldly now or wait a few days for Beria to kill him. Partly it’s that Khrushchev is in love with Svetlana. Not that he says so, or that she understands he’s fumbling for some equivalent of “I love you.” But you sense what’s going on in him when he babbles that he’ll never let any harm come to her, that he’d personally stand in the way of any harm—professions that do nothing, as they drag on, except provoke Svetlana into shouting that he’s the only one around here talking about harm, and some help he’d be anyway. Riseborough fully lives up to her flaming hair, as she shows an initial bafflement igniting into alarm and then outrage; but Buscemi is the actor who goes through the bigger transformation in this scene, as Khrushchev nerves himself up to overstep a limit with Svetlana. Even though his daring in this scene yields him nothing except rejection, the momentum will carry him toward a second, far more dangerous threshold.

If this sounds like a romantic process more than a historical one, bear in mind that Iannucci claims to be nothing more than an entertainer, whose source for The Death of Stalin is a graphic novel of the same name by Fabien Nury and Thierry Robin. The authors researched their subject both deeply and a little indiscriminately. That pianist performing Mozart, for example, is based on the real-life Maria Yudina, but she is shown in the context of a questionable episode from Solomon Volkov’s much-disputed Testimony. As you might expect, then, Nury and Robin’s treatment of the material, and Iannucci’s, relies on broad contour lines and heavy contrasts. Their Yudina not only expresses her contempt for Stalin, as the historical figure did, but becomes the precipitating cause of his death when she manages to slip him a defi-

ant note, whose message spurs the dictator’s collapse. History advances by sympathetic magic, as well as by slapstick and unrequited love—which is fine in a movie so long as it’s a good one, like The Death of Stalin.

Honesty compels me, though, to mention that the great film about the death of Stalin is the 1998 Khrustalyov, My Car! With its multitude of characters ironically sideswiped by the cruelties of history and crazily shuffled by the raging, satirical writer-director Aleksey German, it’s a movie so exhaustingly dense and outlandish in every scene—so disconcerting, disorienting, eyeball-blasting, and heart-confounding—that my colleague John Powers once suggested that the New York Film Festival ought to sell tickets for 10-minute excerpts, since that was enough to give you the idea, and more than most people could absorb.

Needless to say, you can’t watch Khrustalyov, My Car! on Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, or
whatever pirate site your 14-year-old nephew has been using to download porn—though a few DVDs are still knocking around—so by dangling this unobtainable experience before you, I'm really just playing a nasty, teasing power game. Which seems appropriate, since it's what so many of the characters in *The Death of Stalin* are accustomed to do. Maybe the movie doesn't live up to the most lavish praise that's been heaped on it, but there's a certain grim pleasure to be had from seeing its knaves and fools stripped down to their essential, vulgar meanness—especially now, as we watch our mean, vulgar fool in the White House dancing with the Kremlin's knife. If you want a couple hours' relief from that spectacle, you might try *The Death of Stalin*. The laughter won't stick in your throat—much.

To return, though, to where this story began: “Yes, that’s it!” Karl cries to Friedrich as they reel, very drunkenly, through an alley in Paris on the first night of their bromance. “Until now, philosophers interpreted the world. But it must be transformed!” At this stage of intoxication, guys like Seth Rogen and James Franco might have had the sudden, giggling inspiration, if transported back to the 19th century, to borrow that sweet phaeton they'd spotted in an archduke's driveway and take it for a trot through the Bois de Boulogne. Not Karl and Friedrich: They come up with the *Theses on Feuerbach*.

So it goes in *The Young Karl Marx*, an improbably lush and deadpan-funny epic about a pair of two-fisted materialists and the bodacious babes who loved them, as they brawled and rollicked their way toward writing *The Communist Manifesto*. (“We must deliver it by February first! Only five weeks!”) Directed by Raoul Peck on the heels of his triumphant *I Am Not Your Negro*, and co-written by him with the perpetually waggish Pascal Bonitzer (who has helped the likes of Raul Ruiz and Jacques Rivette invent unexpected gifts), *The Young Karl Marx* is to the best of my knowledge something new, both in buddy comedies and romantic costume adventures: the story of a scheme to shoulder aside the leaders of the League of the Just and reiterate what socialists have tried to do. Although he clearly wants to entertain, he does not signal a desire like Iannucci’s to make you laugh—that's your choice—and at the end presents a heroic montage of communism’s march through the decades. Faced with that finale, I have to say that one of my abilities is a capacity to make distinctions, and one of my needs is for a fair historical accounting. So, while I insist that communism get credit for its role in the international labor movement and the struggle against colonialism, I also think that Peck’s montage ought to have included a few less celebratory images: Soviet tanks on the streets of Budapest and Prague, let's say, or starving Chinese peasants slaving over backyard steel foundries, or the rogues’ gallery from *The Death of Stalin*. Despite that lapse, Peck has, as with *Lumumba*, proved that he has a skill for historical epics. Now that it’s streaming, will you enjoy watching it? Very possibly, if you’ve got enough nerdiness to thrill at seeing Marx and Engels respond to Proudhon’s *The Philosophy of Poverty* with *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Is the whole thing kind of silly? Yes, but maybe not quite enough. Will it inspire the masses to take up the *Manifesto* anew? Now, that’s funny.
Puzzle No. 3462

ACROSS

1 Buddy, heading west with newlywed, takes in German university town (9)
6 Mailer avoiding northern holiday celebration (5)
9 Sporting event where you’d see boats tear wildly around rod (7)
10 Good grade the night before, securing Yale student’s credit (7)
11 Interchanges tragic ending with what might happen during a breakup (12)
14 Principles of an alien minyan? (6)
15 Creator of 24 in 7 (8)
17 Quit 24 in 8 (8)
19 Shiny and grand, from a bygone era (6)
21 Assuming liability for a footnote? (12)
25 Discussed reason at critical island beach in the Pacific (7)
26 Dog limits onset of dot-com crash (7)

DOWN

1 Lampoon Fleischer and pet in therapy (10)
2 Gosh, son does exercises after taking up PE (2,8)
3 Deserter has to be in French asylum (7)
4 It could be boring to support medical professional with slow, elongated manner of speech (5)
5 Hugged Aunt Bee and ran (8)
6 Composer’s garment covering fabrication (7)
7 Mammal turning over 8 (4)
8 7 growing grass (4)
12 Notice blithering idiot occupying hotel, too (2,8)
13 Sin, to Reverend Spooner: Nana’s hair (10)
16 Arnold doubled over, clutching crooked dice (8)
18 Discharge last one in accounting and rehire? (7)
20 Brazilian city consumed by cheers for ball team (7)
22 Crazy World War II soldier with a decisive blow (5)
23 Shoot Ford model with hairpiece (4)
24 Sing off-key or communicate silently (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3461

ACROSS

27 Ugly green type (5)
28 Huge crowd you once encountered at defunct Las Vegas casino (9)

DOWN

1 Lampoon Fleischer and pet in therapy (10)
2 Gosh, son does exercises after taking up PE (2,8)
3 Deserter has to be in French asylum (7)
4 It could be boring to support medical professional with slow, elongated manner of speech (5)
5 Hugged Aunt Bee and ran (8)
6 Composer’s garment covering fabrication (7)
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