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A Historic Day for Korea

April 27, 2018, was a historic day for Korea, and for the millions of people on both sides of that tragically divided peninsula. In a meticulously planned event, Kim Jong-un, the 34-year-old hereditary dictator of North Korea, stepped carefully over the border running through the truce village of Panmunjom and clasped hands with Moon Jae-in, the democratically elected president of South Korea.

Kim’s action marked the start of a remarkable day in which the two nations “solemnly declared” an end to the Korean War, which ripped the country apart from 1950 to 1953. “When you crossed the military border for the first time, Panmunjom became a symbol of peace, not a symbol of division,” said Moon, the son of two North Korean refugees who fled south in 1950. A former student activist and human-rights lawyer who was chief of staff to former president Roh Moo-hyun, Moon ran for office in 2017 on a pledge to make that moment of reconciliation possible.

Over the next few hours, accompanied by top aides and diplomats, generals and intelligence chiefs, the Korean leaders discussed an agreement that would lead to what they both described as the “complete demilitarization” of the peninsula. The two also “affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord,” a signal to both the United States and China that the days of great-power intervention in their divided country may be waning.

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The inter-Korea summit was designed to pave the way for the upcoming meeting between Kim and President Trump, which the White House now says will take place by the end of May, with Panmunjom a possible venue. (Singapore and Mongolia are also in the running.) Trump accepted Kim’s invitation to meet after hearing through Moon’s representatives in Washington that the North Korean leader had promised to discuss ending his nuclear and missile programs in a negotiated process. His guarantees were later confirmed directly by then-CIA director Mike Pompeo during an unprecedented meeting in Pyongyang in early April.

Pompeo, who was recently confirmed by the Senate as Trump’s new secretary of state, said the upcoming meeting offered a “real opportunity” to negotiate an end to North Korea’s nuclear program. Kim, meanwhile, has already made some unilateral concessions. Before his summit with Moon, he announced that he had ended all nuclear and missile tests; was closing the country’s only nuclear-testing facility, under a mountain called Punggye-ri; and would accept the presence of US military forces in South Korea as part of a peace agreement.

Over the weekend, Moon’s press secretary re-
United We Stand

85% Americans who want to overhaul campaign-finance laws

67% Americans who favor stricter gun-control laws

69% Americans who support capping greenhouse-gas emissions

62% Americans who believe that upper-income individuals don’t pay enough in taxes

82% Americans who are bothered—either “some” or “a lot”—that corporations aren’t paying their fair share in taxes

18% Americans who trust the US government

Statistics taken from “America Is Less Polarized Than You Think” by Frances Moore Lappé at TheNation.com

Tim Shorrock has been writing for The Nation about North and South Korea since 1983. He interviewed Moon Jae-in last May during his campaign for president.
ally, it’s essential that white parents are comfortable talking with their adopted children about race and about the racism they may sometimes face. (Black parents can be good role models for white parents in this situation.) A “color-blind” approach to child-rearing, even if well-meaning, can backfire in a still-racist society.

The experience of transracial adoption is changing, however, as more families become more multicolored for other reasons, including interracial marriage and dating, which are far more common now than in the 1970s. American society is growing ever more multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural.

Today, adoption agencies are barred by federal law from considering race in adoption placement at all. That may sound like a shocking overcorrection—surely a black couple should get first priority over others waiting to adopt a black child—but the law is intended to address other racist injustices, not least the fact that black children take longer than white children to be adopted and spend far too long in foster care. Arguing in support of this reform, Harvard professor Randall Kennedy, author of *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*, declared that trying to pair children with adoptive parents of the same race “buttresses the notion that people of different racial backgrounds really are different in some moral, unbridgeable, permanent sense. It affirms the notion that race should be a cage to which people are assigned at birth…. [It] instructs us that our affections are and should be bounded by the color line regardless of our efforts.” While the white-savior complex and, yes, orientalism of asking for a Friend

**Questions?**

Ask Liza at [TheNation.com/article/assembling-for-a-friend](TheNation.com/article/assembling-for-a-friend).

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**Adoptive Measures**

Dear Liza,

My spouse and I are considering adoption, probably domestically. We are both white with professional degrees. We would welcome a child of any color and are disturbed by the clearly racist patterns in domestic adoption. But we also often sense something ethically ambiguous or even orientalist in certain adoptions by white people of children of color. I have also heard that these situations can be very difficult for the child. What's the best thing to do?

—Hopeful Parent

Dear Hopeful,

This question has been the subject of newly feverish discussion since the deaths in late March of six black teenage children who’d apparently been abused and neglected (even deprived of food) by their white adoptive parents. Compounding the horror, the white couple had enjoyed a sickening degree of veneration from parts of their community for their supposed altruism. But the issue has a long history, Hopeful, most of it more nuanced and complex.

Before the middle of the previous century, transracial adoption was rare, but two things happened that made it more acceptable in the US: the widespread adoption of Korean orphans after the Korean War, and the civil-rights movement, which offered hope for an integrated society. But as more white families adopted black children, many people began to worry that the practice wasn’t in the children’s best interests. In 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers took what the organization described as a “vehement stand against the placement of black children in white homes for any reason,” denouncing it as a form of cultural genocide and a perpetuation of black people’s “chattel status.” The NABSW questioned whether white parents could raise black children who were secure in their identity and adequately prepare them to deal with racism. This stance was influential at the time, sowing doubt that white parents could bring up well-adjusted black children.

The research on that question actually suggests that being adopted by parents of a different race does not in itself cause problems for kids. It does show, however, that much depends on what the white parents do to help their adopted children of color thrive. Living in a racially diverse community with integrated schools helps, as it can be difficult for adopted children of color to grow up in predominantly white places. Addition-

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ILLUSTRATED BY JOANNA NEBORSKY
New York Times columnist David Brooks recently expressed his concern that “the anti-Trump movement is a failure…. We have persuaded no one…. We have not hindered him…. We have not dislodged him…. We have not contained him.” Brooks then went on to note that “Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party is complete. Eighty-nine percent of Republicans have a positive impression of the man. According to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 59 percent of Republicans consider themselves more a supporter of Trump than of the Republican Party.” A recent paper by Vanderbilt University political scientist Larry Bartels reveals a party that is thoroughly united behind Trump’s agenda of “antipathy toward Muslims, immigrants, atheists, and gays and lesbians, and racial resentment and concerns about discrimination against whites.”

Herein lies a significant paradox of our politics. The “Never Trump” brand of Republicanism, especially its neocconservative component, occupies a preeminent place in our political media. Yet supporters of Bernie Sanders–style social democracy with a gig at a mainstream newspaper, newspaper, magazine, or cable- or broadcast-news station are about as rare as Republican folk singers—despite the fact that Sanders is among the most popular politicians in America. By Brooks’s own estimation, he and his fellow anti-Trump conservatives represent a politically insignificant splinter of the Republican Party. And yet their number includes not only Brooks, but Bret Stephens and Ross Douthat on the Times’ op-ed page; Michael Gerson, Jennifer Rubin, Charles Krauthammer, Kathleen Parker, and George Will on The Washington Post’s op-ed page; Will, Stephens, Michael Steele, Joe Scarborough, Nicolle Wallace, and Peggy Noonan on MSNBC; Brooks, Gerson, Amy Holmes, and, soon, Margaret Hoover (who will be hosting a new edition of William F. Buckley Jr.’s Firing Line) on PBS; as well as Max Boot, S.E. Cupp, and too many others to mention on CNN.

Another paradox lies in the fact that Trumpism represents a rather minor modification of what the Never Trumpers were selling before Trump took over the party. Indeed, most of the differences are matters of style. Rich Lowry, editor in chief of National Review and presumed author of its famous “Against Trump” editorial, recognizes this and explains: “One of the giant ironies of this whole phenomenon for us is that Trump represents a cartoonish, often exaggerated, version of the direction we wanted to see the party go in.”

Lowry was talking about policy, but a better indicator, as libertarian Conor Friedersdorf notes, was the silence of the now–Never Trumpers when, in the recent past, “huge public problems.” Look at the outrage from the likes of journalists Maggie Haberman and Andrea Mitchell directed against the comedian Michelle Wolf for her genteel grilling of Trump press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner—at the very same moment that the president of the United States, speaking at a Nuremberg-style rally, was screeching: “The laws are so corrupt! They are so corrupt!” On a more elevated level, former Bill Clinton adviser Bill Galston, a smart political scientist and member in good standing of what remains of the centrist establishment, recently published a book-length study called Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy. Repeatedly, Galston condemns what he diagnoses as mere “partisanism” or “gridlock” that “has blocked policy responses to core public problems.” Sorry, Bill—the real problem is the deeply diseased, potentially protofascist Republican Party. Trump is the symptom, not the cause. There is only one cure, and that is to defeat it. There is one way to do that, and that is by supporting its opposition: the Democratic Party. Its conquest of the punditocracy notwithstanding, “Never Trump” Republicanism is about as meaningful an opposition as Jill Stein’s effectively pro-Trump Green Party. Let’s hope CNN isn’t ready to make her an offer as well.
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Dear Liza,

I am an undergraduate student and worker at a small public university in North Dakota. In the past year, I’ve realized that my fellow student workers and I are underpaid, receive inadequate training, lack access to mental-health resources, and are underrepresented in decision-making processes. Drawing from my short time as a leftist, working toward unionizing all student workers appears to be the only option going forward for substantive and lasting change. Having said that, in talking with fellow student workers and friends, there seems to be little understanding of the exploited nature of our labor or interest in doing the necessary work to unionize. Is the conservative culture of North Dakota the reason for their apprehension? Should helping to unionize student workers be the hill I die on? If so, what are the steps forward? If not, what does proper incremental change look like?

—Lost in ND

Dear Lost,

It’s funny: When your letter came in a few months ago, I had a few (now-obsolete) thoughts, then got distracted by other letters—and when I returned to it, its political context had changed dramatically. Now the kind of organizing you’re considering is widespread—perhaps the most hopeful and important political work going on in the United States. I’m talking, of course, about organizing public-sector workers in red states. With schoolteachers going on strike or walking out in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona, all the momentum is with people just like you, who want to organize conservative communities against labor exploitation and failed bipartisan austerity policies. It seems that even many Trump voters are willing to take great risks for labor solidarity and are inspired by the need to revive our crumbling public institutions.

However, as you’ve realized, Lost, they need to be organized. Do you have people who can do this work with you? Are there veteran socialists and labor organizers in the area, as there are just about everywhere in the country? Does your campus have any chapters of nationwide socialist groups? Try bringing in a speaker who has been active in the recent teacher mobilizations—someone who is coming from a similarly conservative culture and facing the same issues as the student workers would be inspiring, and would also help them to better understand their situation.

That said, it’s also important, when organizing, to listen to people: Do they not understand that they are exploited workers, or do they have other concerns that seem more pressing to them? Maybe the problem isn’t the conservative culture; after all, most people in Berkeley, California, aren’t rising up against their exploiters, either. Perhaps the student workers see themselves more as students than as workers, and would rather organize around issues like tuition increases and the need for more public funding for their schools. If so, you and your fellow organizers might consider shifting your emphasis. Don’t die on any hills! Remember that no one issue or strategy is the “only option going forward for substantive and lasting change.” The future is collective, and you and your fellow students will decide together how to get there.
“An indispensable work for all interested in the founding and contemporary racial politics.”
—Annette Gordon-Reed, author of The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family

“No Hamilton fan should do without it. Historians on Hamilton offers informed and insightful meditations on the themes of history, memory, legacy, interpretation and art that lie at the heart of the Broadway smash.”
—David Greenberg, author of Republic of Spin

“If you love Hamilton, this collection provides dozens of fascinating perspectives, correctives, and sidelong directives.
—Jack Viertel, producer, critic, and author

“Thought provoking... If you think there is nothing more to say about one of the most popular and highly lauded musicals in American theater history, read this work and you’ll know you’re mistaken.”
—Starred review, Library Journal
President
Power Play

The Trump administration is considering using the Defense Production Act of 1950 to assert sweeping authority over the nation’s coal and nuclear plants, according to Bloomberg News. The Cold War-era law would allow Trump to effectively nationalize these industries under his control “in the name of national defense.”

The statute was first invoked by President Harry Truman to cap wages and impose price controls on the steel industry during the Korean War. Truman’s gamble largely failed, however: After months of protest and a lawsuit that made its way to the Supreme Court, the steel companies were able to block the president from seizing their mills. But this time the White House and industry are on the same side. The legislation lists energy as a “strategic and critical material” and thus gives the president wide discretion to help these corporations—including by funneling money to modernize plants and expand production capacity.

Despite Trump’s pledge to revitalize the coal industry, its decline has continued unabated. In 2017, coal consumption fell to its lowest level in nearly four decades. While some members of Congress, like Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV), support the administration’s plan, environmental groups worry that this move will force customers and taxpayers to prop up polluting and unprofitable plants. Their concerns may be in vain, however, since Trump doesn’t need congressional approval to use this authority.

—Emmaline Gnilskis

**Presidential Power Play**

**ENERGY**

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—Emmaline Gnilskis

When I play the piano, I do so under the watchful gaze of the great civil-rights activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett. A beautiful bronze bust of her sits atop my old spinet. I may play terribly, but she lends me courage in all endeavors.

Born into slavery in 1862, Wells-Barnett attended what is today Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The college was founded in 1866 by members of the Freedmen’s Aid Society, which came south after the Civil War to set up schools where it had so recently been against the law to teach slaves how to read and write. Many had feared that literacy among slaves would “excite dissatisfaction” (as North Carolina’s law expressed it) and lead to rebellion; indeed, Mississippi’s antebellum law against educating slaves required that freed blacks leave the state altogether.

This fear metastasized after Emancipation. Northern missionaries and reformers flocked to Southern states to establish primary and secondary schools as well as the institutions now referred to as “historically black colleges and universities,” or HBCUs. But white resentment of black empowerment ran deep and strong in the South, culminating in the emergence of terror organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. The repressive backlash of the post-Reconstruction era would be formalized as Jim Crow.

It was during this period that Wells-Barnett came of age. As literacy spread among the former slaves, black journalism flourished across the nation. Wells-Barnett co-owned and edited the newspaper Memphis Free Speech. She urged universal suffrage, including for black men and women. Among other things, she refused to leave a first-class carriage from which a conductor tried to expel her, and filed an early lawsuit challenging whites-only railroad cars. And she launched what would become a lifelong crusade against lynching.

The latter is undoubtedly what she is best remembered for today: Wells-Barnett traveled across the South delivering searing investigative reports on the extrajudicial spectacles of hangings, burnings, and disembowelment. After three of her friends were lynched in 1892 for daring to open a grocery store that competed with a white business, she urged African Americans to pack up and leave Memphis. So many hundreds followed her counsel—among them my grandmother and her sisters—that civic leaders tried to persuade her to retract that advice because of the drain on manual and domestic labor. When she refused, a mob burned down the offices of her paper and vowed to kill her. She fled to Chicago and continued to write.

It is in recognition of this determined advocacy that the newly opened National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, has dedicated a space to her. The memorial is an evocatively beautiful structure composed of hundreds of suspended stelae, symbolic tribute to the thousands of men and women whose murders by lynching were meant to frighten African Americans into silence and submission. Its existence is largely due to the efforts of the extraordinary lawyer Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization dedicated to challenging racial and economic injustice.

While nursing this project to fruition, Stevenson and the EJI began a campaign to label buildings that were once slave warehouses, put up signs where slave auctions took place, and make sacred the places where lynchings occurred. These markers are intended to remind and give pause, to stimulate contemplation of what has been suppressed and denied. They are designed to do the same emotional work as the artist Gunter Demnig’s Stolpersteine, or “stumbling stones”—small cubes inscribed with individual names, placed in the sidewalks of European cities to mark the last place where victims of Nazi extermination had lived.

**Murderers wreak not just public forms of terror, but intergenerational havoc in intimate and domestic spheres as well.**
tors. Murderers wreak not just public forms of terror, but intergenerational havoc in intimate and domestic spheres as well; their victims include their own children, who were taught that unjust death was just life.

Second, we mustn’t forget that this memorial recognizes the diversity of the victims of lynching—which, while directed mainly against black men, spared few who defied white supremacy, including women, Jews, and those deemed foreigners.

Third, we need to erect additional monuments to the legacy of slavery. The symbolic accumulation of things and people we commemorate speaks for itself: Of 152 national monuments, only three are dedicated to women; of 30 national memorials, not a single one is. That’s why it was so good to see Wells-Barnett honored at the national memorial in Montgomery. But perhaps that should inspire us to even greater ambition: Let’s remember that, in addition to being a courageous journalist and a Rosa Parks before her time, Wells-Barnett was also a schoolteacher, a businesswoman, a political candidate, a statistician, a sociologist, a wife and mother of six, an opponent of anti-miscegenation laws, and a feminist who fought for the right of women to vote (while refusing requests that she and other black women march at the back of suffragist demonstrations).

In short, Ida B. Wells-Barnett deserves a far bigger statue than the one on my piano. Luckily, there’s a movement to build her a proper monument of her own in Bronzeville, on the South Side of Chicago, where she spent the latter years of her life. It will cost $300,000, only a third of which has been raised; if you wish to contribute, you may do so at idabwellsmonument.org. Also, her descendants have set up a foundation to provide scholarships for needy students attending Rust College; contributions may be made at ibwfoundation.org.
Letters

The Kids Are Alright
Re “The Disrupters” by George Zornick [April 30/May 7]: This 75-year-old woman thinks these kids may be the way out of the mess this country is in. Moreover, those 17-year-olds can register, and the 18-year-olds can vote. Please, 18-year-olds, vote! Vote! — JULIA NICHOLSON FREDERICK, MD.

After Sandy Hook, I became a dues-paying member of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. I paid my membership for three years, but it all seemed to be futile, so I let my membership lapse. Now I have hope again. — JEFF FAST MINNEAPOLIS

The Lady Is a Champ
In “Stormy Weather” [April 30/May 7], Katha Pollitt, always thoughtful and timely, nails it again (pun intended).

DALLAS BAIRD LINCOLN CITY, ORE.

A History of Decency
As pastor of a church that has been preparing to open our doors to immigrants under threat of deportation and is supporting community through the Dane Sanctuary Coalition in Wisconsin, I celebrate the unique and groundbreaking coverage of Amanda Morales and her family in your April 9 issue (“209 Days Without Sunlight” by Joan Walsh, April 16). By contrast, many liberal and legacy media are engaging in happy talk with their overly optimistic projections of a blue wave. Due to very effective redistricting and gerrymandering in Republican-controlled states, it will take a blue tsunami to regain control of the House, never mind the Senate.

Let’s have more stories on extreme gerrymandering and the 2018 election, and also on protecting our future elections from foreign interference. Even with a blue-wave federal election, it will take several years, if not generations, to overcome Republican control in the majority of our states. — FIONA McGREGOR SAN FRANCISCO

Seeing Red, Feeling Blue
Late thanks to The Nation for publishing such careful research on the difficulties that Democrats, progressives, moderates, and others will face in the 2018 midterms (“The 7,383-Seat Strategy” by Joan Walsh, April 16). By contrast, many liberal and legacy media are engaging in happy talk with their overly optimistic projections of a blue wave. Due to very effective redistricting and gerrymandering in Republican-controlled states, it will take a blue tsunami to regain control of the House, never mind the Senate.

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The idea of a unified Europe didn’t always elicit the current mixture of exasperation, boredom, and rage, in politicians and ordinary people alike. In fact, there was a time when the European Union seemed like a great initiative, especially on a continent ravaged first by two hot wars, then broken in half by a cold one. A permanent peace between neighboring nations founded on a common market and sealed with freedom of movement for all might have required bureaucratic impositions, but it also functioned as an insurance policy. Besides, there was something for everyone in this new idea of Europe. Students, through Erasmus programs, learned new languages and made friends in foreign countries. Blue-collar workers could go abroad for better jobs. Manufacturers could import and export goods with no fees and less paperwork. Children of the European elite found positions in Strasbourg and Brussels. Billionaires no longer had to worry about the power of their country’s home currency while vacationing in Courchevel or Monaco.

That isn’t to say the union would be problem-free: Unresolved conflicts between national sovereignty and a supranational bureaucracy were baked into its very structure. And the EU never totally figured out a unified fiscal policy, or how it would deal with large-scale bank failures. Indeed, it took until the financial crisis of...
2008 for one of the most fundamental tensions of all—that sovereign nations sharing a currency could not make their own decisions about borrowing, lending, and spending—to become a cause for alarm. When banks went on a continent-wide lending spree in good times, the economy hummed along happily. In the grim post-2008 years, Europe’s political and economic union appeared to be in a state of imminent disintegration. When European leaders began pushing austerity on countries like Greece as the only way out of bankruptcy—and when their counterparts farther west felt like they were still picking up the bill—freedom of movement and a common market and currency didn’t seem like such a good trade-off.

Greece was not the only country to rebel against these conditions. Nationalist politicians throughout the continent began to speak of Europe not as one people, but as a hodgepodge of countries bound by pesky supranational rules. Brexit put this notion to a referendum: Why help faceless Europeans when there are Brits down the street who need help too? And why bother with the entire supranational enterprise anyway? Nor are Brexiteers the only ones asking these questions. Many on the left—from Greece’s Syriza to Ménchon’s La France Insoumise—also had grown uncomfortable with the idea and especially the economic institutions of “Europe.”

When Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister who hopes to become the country’s next prime minister in 2019, first came to international prominence in the aftermath of the financial crisis, he was one of those left-wing politicians critical of Europe’s economic institutions, though not necessarily of the idea of Europe itself. Even as a young man, Varoufakis had always been struck by the idea of a united Europe as a way to “forge bonds relying not on kin, language, ethnicity, or a common enemy, but on common values and humanist principles.” His brief stint in the Syriza government never shook that conviction, but it did shape his ideas about how Europe should be reformed, and his trilogy of books about the financial crisis—The Global Minotaur; And the Weak Suffer What They Must; and Adults in the Room—a long with his latest book to be released in English, Talking to My Daughter About the Economy, all advance his vision of a more democratic international system.

The problem with Europe is that it is not a political union but a monetary one. Worse, key decisions about spending and lending are shaped by German and French technocrats, not by elected national representatives acting on their constituents’ wishes. Varoufakis’s reform proposals, put forward via his new pan-European movement, DiEM25 (“Day 25” in Latin), are wide-ranging and admirable. He hopes to see something like a United States of Europe emerge out of the EU’s existing structure—one in which Europeans share rights and responsibilities in both good times and bad, aided by the continent’s central banks, which would pool the profits from their various investments in a common depository in order to secure the economy in moments of crisis or scarcity. A share of every initial public offering undertaken in the EU would likewise go toward a universal dividend for all Europeans; citizens would be guaranteed a decent job in their home country, to prevent involuntary migration. By the same token, a common inheritance tax would apply, regardless of where people lived (or died).

Rather than getting bailed out in their home country, banks would be “Europeanized” and put under public control. The European Central Bank would be more helpful to member states seeking debt relief and financing. Finally, the euro would remain in place—but through a system of digital tax credits, or “fiscal money” that could only be used at home, individual countries would have a certain amount of leeway to make their own decisions concerning alleviating poverty and funding public projects. All the while, freedom of movement throughout the EU would still apply.

There’s a lot going on here—some of it eminently practical, some not—and one could debate the specifics of Varoufakis’s policies. But the overarching motivation is simple: more democracy, more Europe, and more of the right kind of globalization to give substance to the idea of a European unity.

Varoufakis summed up the spirit of his worldview in a 2015 standoff with then–German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble: “The obvious solution [is] the globalization of welfare benefits and living wages, rather than the globalization of insecure working poverty.”

Varoufakis’s political career had begun in earnest the year before, when Alexis Tsipras, Syriza’s candidate in the approaching national elections, asked Varoufakis to be his finance minister should the scrappy leftist party win. Varoufakis had in the mid-2000s briefly advised George Papandreou’s social-democratic administration (which he came to publicly despise), but Tsipras’s offer was Varoufakis’s first opportunity to formally enter into Greek politics. Until then, he had mostly been known for his academic work. A trained economist with advanced degrees in game theory, Varoufakis had been elected to serve as leader of the black student union as an undergraduate at England’s University of Essex, arguing that “black” was a “state of mind” and that, as a Greek, in the context of a dominant Northern Europe, he more than fit the bill. Finishing his doctorate in Essex in 1987, Varoufakis hopped from one academic appointment to the next over the following 20 years, teaching in the UK, Australia, and the US before returning to Greece to run the University of Athens’s economics PhD program.

In the years following the 2008 meltdown, Varoufakis began writing in a plain and refreshing English about the crash on his blog. When he was approached about the finance minister’s position in late 2014, he decided to first run for Parliament before being formally appointed, because he wanted the backing of the Greek people. He got it: Varoufakis won more votes than any other candidate. By then, he had already established a reputation as an outspoken Marxist iconoclast at home, and his entrée onto the international scene could not have been better timed. The cast of the European debt narrative appeared almost exclusively in muted suits, so Varoufakis’s presence—leather-jacketed and pulling up on a motorcycle—filled a significant dramatic hole.

The real work began two days after his election. As Syriza’s finance minister, he had to negotiate intractable debt-reduction deals on his country’s behalf. At this point the European Central Bank was offering Greece financing, but the terms were onerous; the rest of Europe was dead set on punishing his country for its previous fiscal transgressions, some of which were
Civic Hope is a beautifully written analysis of letters to the editors of local newspapers in twelve mid-sized American cities from 1948 to 2012. It shows how 'the people next door' persevere to renew the possibility for participatory democracy through their arguments.

– Ann Crigler, University of Southern California

Professor Hart is amongst the most well-known and highly-regarded students of political language. It should come as no surprise, then, that his recent book offers a careful analysis of political language, this time in letters to the editor.

– Stuart Soroka, University of Michigan

A masterwork of substance and style, this book should be essential reading for anyone interested in understanding and promoting healthy public discourse.

– Michael A. Xenos, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Hart offers a corrective to the gloom and cynicism that suffuses discourse about politics and democracy today. Despite its undeniable problems, American democracy is surviving due to argumentative, sometimes cantankerous citizens and their humble acts of democratic citizenship.

– Regina Lawrence, University of Oregon

Hart reveals and reminds that citizen discourse is often the best indicator of public opinion, and that the voices of ordinary people are critical to the health of democracy.

– Dhavan V. Shah, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Civic Hope is a history of what everyday Americans say – in their own words – about the government overseeing their lives. Based on a highly original analysis of 10,000 letters to the editor from 1948 to the present published in twelve U.S. cities, the book overcomes the limitations of survey data by revealing the reasons for people’s attitudes. While Hart identifies worrisome trends – including a decline in writers’ abilities to explain what their opponents believe and their attachment to national touchstones – he also shows why the nation still thrives.

Civic Hope makes a powerful case that the vitality of a democracy lies not in its strengths but in its weaknesses and in the willingness of its people to address those weaknesses without surcease. The key, Hart argues, is to sustain a culture of argument at the grassroots level.
real (like the Greeks’ tendency not to pay their taxes) while others were a product of happy-go-lucky lending in deficit countries on the part of large banks, with no plan B on the continental level to manage the fallout.

Varoufakis had no love for his country’s creditors, but he saw the EU favoring the bottom lines of international banks over the welfare of the Greek people. He was also practical, and keen to “shower [the EU] with moderation” and prove it wrong about the Greeks being undisciplined and lazy. So he assembled an international team of supporters, including American economists Jeffrey Sachs and James Galbraith, former treasury secretary Larry Summers (aka “the Prince of Darkness”), and Deutsche Bank’s Thomas Mayer, along with some financiers from Lazard, the asset-management and advisory firm, to demonstrate to Brussels that he was willing to negotiate on its terms.

That was when his lack of political experience started to show. Over the five months that followed, his meetings followed a depressing pattern: A sanguine Varoufakis would enter the negotiations, with a mandate from his people to reject the austerity measures that were causing a crisis back home. He would hit it off with seemingly sympathetic European ministers who, in private, would appear to be on his side. He’d spend all night coming up with an ingenious financial workaround to placate even the most hawkish austerity-mongers, thinking sincerely that he was getting somewhere. Then he’d wake up to discover that he had been stabbed in the back by much of the rest of Europe.

The betrayals in Brussels came from all over: socialists, conservatives, friends, foes. Varoufakis noticed a “terrible disconnect between the eminently sensible things some ministers say behind closed doors and the inanity of their statements...when the television cameras are switched on,” he writes in And the Weak Suffer What They Must? The only person to play it straight was Schäuble, whom Varoufakis characterizes repeatedly as a humorless crank (part of it seems to be his frustration at his own inability to charm whom Varoufakis characterizes repeatedly as cosmopolitan (he spent time abroad in part to avoid the draft), he still identifies very much as Greek. His commitment to public service easily defies British Prime Minister Theresa May’s now-infamous statement that “if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere”; Varoufakis wanted to see Greece escape from the fate that the troika was imposing upon it and set an example for anti-austerity parties across the continent. To add insult to injury, he got blamed by his party for screwing up in Brussels. Some have even attached a price tag to this failure, arguing that he’d personally cost Greece billions of euros.

Varoufakis’s resignation nevertheless helped him out in one way: He’d held public office but never actually had to sell out. Since Varoufakis has always presented himself as a bit punk, that didn’t exactly hurt his image. While politicians and elites snubbed him, he explains in Adults in the Room,

Taxi drivers, suited gentlemen, old women, schoolchildren, policemen, conservative family men, nationalist and far-Left recalcitrants alike—a whole society whose sense of pride and dignity had been offended... would stop me in the street to offer thanks for that brief moment... It is a source of personal pride and joy to me that the troika’s cheerleaders within Greece use every opportunity they can to undermine me. I consider their attacks a badge of honor, conferred for having dared to say no to their demands in the Eurogroup.

Since stepping down, Varoufakis has used his considerable talents as a writer, an economist, and, yes, a brand to demystify complex financial concepts designed to elude us. He’s appeared on TV shows, in gossip rags, even on Russell Brand’s podcast to further this mission. “I have always believed that if you are not able to explain the economy in a language young people can understand, then, quite simply, you are clueless yourself,” he writes in Talking to My Daughter About the Economy, his back-of-the-envelope history of modern capitalism. “...Ensuring that everyone is allowed to talk authoritatively about the economy is a prerequisite for a good society and a precondition for an authentic democracy.” If this is his goal, then Varoufakis has more than achieved it. Throughout this book and his three earlier ones, he clearly and patiently helps readers come to an understanding of just how much power global corporate finance—and the supranational institutions that serve it—wields over our lives.

This isn’t to say that his books are beach reads, exactly. (I would know—I read Adults in the Room on a beach.) The subjects he covers range from Eurobonds to Breton Woods and back to the European Central Bank; they are intricate and often dull, even when he liven them up with backroom gosip and references to Greek drama (his interlocutors, he notes, are characters straight out of Sophocles or Shakespeare: “neither good nor bad... overtaken by the unintended consequences of their conception of what they ought to do”). Still, Varoufakis patiently diagnoses problems in the system, then
suggests a great many solutions. He lays out his proposed solution to his country’s debt crisis—essentially an innovative debt swap that pegs how much Greece should repay and at what rate to its GDP and rate of growth—so clearly and convincingly that it’s hard to argue with (unless, of course, you’re a Eurocrat who had actually been arguing with him). Why shouldn’t repayment be linked to recovery? It’s a perfectly logical solution.

When it looked like Greece might be cut off from receiving funds if it didn’t agree to the Eurogroup’s demands, Varoufakis devised a parallel economic system of “fiscal money” that would allow Greeks to pay for goods and services using future tax credits instead of cash, thereby keeping the economy running. He later even admitted to hatching a harebrained contingency plan that involved hacking into Greece’s tax systems with the help of a childhood friend who knew about software and assigning a reserve account to every tax file. Fiscal policy has never sounded this straightforward—but as Varoufakis came to realize, good economics do not good politics make.

One lesson Varoufakis learned during his time in Brussels was that nearly all of Europe’s economic questions boiled down to political ones, and vice versa. What is failing to keep Europe—the idea and the continent—together is that the EU did not evolve into a single political institution, but instead became more like a group of sparring sovereigns. Going back to the EU’s origins, Varoufakis argues that its inflexibility is hardwired: From its inception as a “bureaucracy” status, the EU was “invented to serve a cartel of large businesses seeking common rules and industry standards in perfect freedom from any parliament with real power over its actions.” The single market, the sub-sub-agencies, the jobs advising the advisers’ advisers—these, too, were all created with the elites in mind. Most insidiously, he writes, the EU’s institutions “were designed, back in the 1950s and 1960s, in order to bleach politics out of them. And since nothing is as political nor as toxic as an attempt to depoliticize a political process, the result was institutions at odds with the concept and practices of a democracy.” Along with his commitment to internationalism, the idea that all decisions around money are political emerges as a first principle in Varoufakis’s thought. Today, his project seeks to combine these two principles into a coherent leftist platform.

You can take the money out of politics, but you can’t take the politics out of money, Varoufakis explains in Talking to My Daughter About the Economy. This is the case within each country, but as important, it is also the case between them. “There is nothing wrong with the idea of a Single Market from the Atlantic to the Ukraine and from the Shetlands to Crete,” he writes. “Borders are awful scars on the planet and the sooner we dispose of them the better, as the recent Syrian refugee crisis confirms. And there is nothing wrong with a single currency either.” What is wrong is the system of institutions that currently regulate and manage Europe’s single market and single currency; they cannot exist without a functional democracy to stabilize the powers that be. “While the unimpeded movement of goods, money and moneyed executives,” Varoufakis insists, “has always been a sacred cow of globalized finance...the equivalent freedom of movement for people has always been severely circumscribed. No wonder, then, that racism grows in proportion to our free trade zones’ economic crises.”

But there’s another, underappreciated challenge to fixing Europe that Varoufakis seems to grasp intuitively: The institutions that govern Europe are not just flawed, but boring. Varoufakis’s gripes could just as easily be rephrased to say: Europe is an institution governed by bores, who make boring rules about boring things and make even the most outrageous proposals—austerity, for starters—sound boring. If Europeans are ever going to engage or care enough to change things, this can’t go on. Politics and economics need to become interesting again. The stakes are just too high. Toward the end of And the Weak Suffer What They Must?, Varoufakis poses what has emerged as the central question of his political project today: “Can we combine deep criticism of the European Union with an appreciation of the tremendous costs that its fragmentation would occasion?”

That’s the question Varoufakis’s new European political movement, DiEM25, is supposed to answer. It’s also the motivation behind his 2019 candidacy in Greece with a new party called MeRA25, the party of “responsible disobedience.” DiEM25 is premised on the idea of a different kind of Europe—a more democratic one focused on sharing borders but also against nationalist parochialism.” Varoufakis and his followers initially thought they might be able to achieve these goals by supplementing national parties with...
a “transnational list” to compete for seats in the European Parliament. These slots, they hoped, would replace the ones abandoned by the UK after Brexit; they would thus discourage nationalism at the procedural level, by making room for political parties to appeal to all EU citizens, not just those in their home country. The EP voted against transnational lists in February; DiEM25, registered as an international organization under EU law, still has plans to organize across borders and to partner with politicians in individual countries to advance their ideas on the ballot.

To that end, DiEM25 has proposed a policy platform that local politicians might attach themselves to: a European New Deal that revolves around green energy, more debt reform, profit-sharing, and other progressive ideas. At this early stage, its mission, while ambitious and clearly articulated, rests more on big ideas than actionable policies; the movement’s jargon-heavy organizational structure, with its “coordinating collective,” “advisory panel,” “validating council,” and so on, is faintly reminiscent of an undergraduate Trotskyist group (or worse, the EU itself).

It’s hard to imagine this European New Deal taking shape unless its supporters come to power on a large scale, but there’s nevertheless something to be said for Varoufakis pushing these ideas into the open. Much as he did with his memoirs and columns, he is moving the Overton window to the left—and given the spirited conversations taking place about a universal basic income, job guarantees, and even cryptocurrencies (which Varoufakis characterizes as utter nonsense), the time seems right for it.

Varoufakis’s national party, MeRA25, is positioning itself to seize this sort of power, or at least a seat at the table. It is likewise based on economic recovery and debt relief—for starters, nationalizing the banks on day one to pay back Greece’s debt. That, of course, is a matter of political, economic, and personal importance for its leader: “I wake up, and dream at night, of debt [relief],” Varoufakis told The Guardian. “It’s like being a prisoner of war. You have to try to escape. Our country is a debtors’ prison.” MeRA25 is not shy about framing the challenges facing Europe in class terms. “A vicious class war lurks behind the infamous ‘reforms’ that the ‘radical left’ Syriza government is implementing,” Varoufakis writes on his website, reminding voters and readers that the persistent ill-effects of austerity on pensions, employment, and public assets are all designed to benefit Greece’s creditors, not its people.

If elected, MeRA25 wants to leverage Greece’s position to force change, by hook or by crook. And Varoufakis is the obvious—or rather, the only—man for this job. Without being bound by someone else’s agenda (or sense of decorum), he can neutralize his training as a game theorist and his experience working with the European establishment to go back and make good on the types of threats Syriza never carried through. This would involve enacting its democratically chosen domestic agenda, even against the wishes of the Eurogroup; halting repayment to the IMF, the European Central Bank, and the other bodies set up to bail outailing states; turning to Varoufakis’s alternate banking proposal should the country run out of money; and all the while, accepting the possibility of expulsion from the EU. MeRA25 reminds us that after 10 years of crisis and decades of bad leadership, Greece has nothing left to lose. In that, Varoufakis has found a certain freedom.

Since both DiEM25 and MeRA25 are not only the parties of new European democracy but also the parties of Yanis Varoufakis, they are not lacking in radical chic. Naomi Klein, Saskia Sassen, and Richard Sennett are all part of DiEM25’s advisory board. Brian Eno, another supporter, composed an anthem titled “Stochastic Processional” for the European movement. In math, “stochastic” means something has a random pattern of distribution. That might describe Varoufakis’s strange bedfellows: Julian Assange, whom he continues to defend loudly, on grounds that he’s being hounded not for sex crimes but for radical transparency; the linguist Noam Chomsky; the film-maker Ken Loach; and the ex-president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa.

It doesn’t take Cambridge Analytica to figure out that this all-star lineup is unlikely to appeal to someone who isn’t already a Brian Eno fan with a copy of No Logo on his or her nightstand. Even so, Varoufakis says his aim with his new MeRA25 party in Greece is to win over the 1 million voters who don’t show up at the ballot box because they are too radical. Varoufakis has also been outspoken about wanting to forge alliances with centrist “reactionary forces”—even those seduced by right-wing ideas—in order to stabilize Europe.

Varoufakis’s search for approval from the right comes through in his writing, too. He takes an impish pleasure in quoting Margaret Thatcher’s comments on how the European monetary union was fated to be wholly undemocratic. He relishes the chance to surprise his reader politically, noting that his “friendship with true-blue Tory and Euroscptic Lord Lamont of Lerwick, the chancellor who had ensured that Britain dropped out of the European Monetary System...was at odds with my image as a loony-left extremist.” He spares no criticism for the chickenshit leftists in Brussels—or in Greece, for that matter. He’s running for office against his former party, after all.

Varoufakis, in other words, is speaking to everyone you’d expect—all while subliminally marketing himself as the “loony-left extremist” whom even Tories can get behind. His vision is syncretic: a radicalism rooted in institutions, or perhaps a kind of Macronian Marxism. It’s a fitting approach for a political moment when figures like Steven Pinker preach the gospel of “reason, science, humanism, and progress.” And it dovetails with Varoufakis’s academic training as a game theorist, and his power-obsessed, materialist reading of history. In the prologue to Talking to My Daughter, he cites Jared Diamond’s Guns, Germs, and Steel as one of his biggest influences (the book got a lot of flak for its Eurocentric perspective). His appeal to repentant centrists—or those who want to maintain their freedom of movement within Europe, are generally progressive on social issues, and would very much like for the extreme right to go away—seems, for the first time, rather viable. Still, to succeed as a leftist candidate and organization, Varoufakis and the DiEM25 movement will have to find allies in umbrella organizations such as the Party of the European Left, who attended DiEM25’s launch of its transnational list not as participants but as “observers.” He will presumably also have to deal with those on the left who are Euroskeptics themselves.

Varoufakis has his work cut out for him. Though he describes himself as an internationalist, a leftist, and an “erratic Marxist,” his politics don’t fit neatly inside a box. That makes him more interesting, intellectually speaking, than the likes of Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders. It also makes him less palatable as a politician. This is a man who led a black student union in his university days and now routinely rubs shoulders with bankers and Tories; a man whose wife is thought to be the inspiration for Pulp’s “Common People,” and whose own dispatches about spending time with actual common people come off as quite canned, but who would happily nationalize banks in a heartbeat should he be given that power. Dashing by on his motorbike, he can appear to embody the worst kind of champagne socialism. And yet he does inspire confidence: If anyone can figure out a way to put a chicken in every pot and a bottle of bubbly on every table, it’s Yanis Varoufakis.
am glad you’ve read the Heart of D. tho’ of course it’s an awful fudge,” Joseph Conrad wrote to Roger Casement in late 1903. Casement, an Irish diplomat working for the British Foreign Office, had just returned to London from Belgium’s African colony, the Congo Free State, and was about to submit a report to Parliament detailing the existence of a vast system of slavery used to extract ivory and rubber. Looking to draw public attention to the atrocities, Casement traveled to the author’s home outside London to attempt to recruit him into the Congo Reform Association. Conrad was sympathetic: Africa, he told Casement, shared with Europe “the consciousness of the universe in which we live,” and it had been difficult for him to learn that the horrors he witnessed on his 1890 trip up the Congo River had only gotten worse. But he resisted playing the part of an on-the-spot authority and begged off joining Casement’s association. “I would help him but it is not in me,” Conrad later explained to a friend. “I am only a wretched novelist inventing wretched stories and not even up to that miserable game.”
For more than a century, those “wretched stories” and their author have elicited strong opinions. H. L. Mencken described Conrad as a “cosmic artist” who captured “the overwhelming sweep and devastation of universal forces.” E. M. Forster judged Conrad’s writing “misty in the middle as well as at the edges,” more “vapour” than “jewel.” Edward Said thought there were two Conrads: the anti-imperialist who was the first to treat empire as a “system,” and the imperialist who taught that the system was inescapable. Chine Achebe, the Nigerian author of Things Fall Apart, considered him a “thoroughgoing racist.”

In The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World, Maya Jasanoff takes up Conrad’s life and work not to add to this stockpile of opinion, but to explore how Conrad’s writing captured the early years of globalization, and how the questions he grappled with continue to resonate today. A professor of history at Harvard University, Jasanoff is the author of two previous books, Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750–1850 (2005) and Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World (2011). Both were more traditional studies—the first of art collectors in British India and Egypt, the second of British loyalists fleeing the American Revolution to Canada and the Caribbean. The Dawn Watch is intended as something different, more experimental and speculative in its exploration of the line separating fiction from nonfiction. As Jasanoff writes, she used “the compass of a historian, the chart of a biographer, and the navigational sextant of a fiction reader” to compose this work. She consulted Conrad’s many biographers; studied his books and the multiple volumes of his published letters; and even retraced some of his voyages. She sailed on a container ship across the Indian Ocean, flew to Kisangani (formerly Stanleyville), and took a riverboat down the Congo. Floating to Kinshasa, she reread Heart of Darkness and “batted away tsetse flies.”

Conrad’s novels, writes Jasanoff, are “ethical injunctions,” meditations “on how to behave in a globalizing world.” The Dawn Watch is a reminder that, as Conrad understood, what passes for civilization is really often refined savagery. Jasanoff provides close, contextual readings of The Secret Agent, Lord Jim, Heart of Darkness, and Nostromo, novels that conjure the complacencies and self-delusions of the Western bourgeoisie as all-encompassing, holding everybody in their thrall regardless of status, class, or race. The problem, though, is that Jasanoff seems to have been caught as well.

Joseph Conrad was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in 1857 into the Polish szlachta, or gentry, in what is now Ukraine but was then ruled by Russia. Conrad’s father, Apollo, was a poet and nationalist often imprisoned by the czarist authorities; he was finally banished in 1862 to the threshold of Siberia, which wrecked his family. Conrad’s parents died within several years of being exiled, and Conrad himself was left physically and emotionally shattered. He was rescued from destitution by his wealthy maternal uncle, who took charge of his education and helped restore him to health. At the age of 16, after a frustrating stint at boarding school, Conrad made his way to Marseille, sailing with the French before joining the British merchant marine and moving to London.

Conrad slipped quickly into the higher rungs of shipboard hierarchy, as Britain’s expanding commercial empire gave him a chance to salvage his identity as part of the gentry. By the 1870s, Britain had largely given up most of the worst practices of merchant-fleet tyranny, including floggings and impressment. But as a captain, Conrad could rule his ships with baronial power. “A Polish nobleman, casied in British tar” was how Conrad, who now started inserting the high-sounding “de” before his surname, described himself.

In the interior provinces of Conrad’s Central European boyhood, where his Polish family stood above the surrounding mass of Ukrainian serfs, coerced labor wasn’t especially racially marked. Now, though, Conrad found himself traveling to the outer limits of a world empire, and the shipboard pecking order generally reflected that empire’s color line. Even as sailing allowed Conrad to reassert something familiar—the “nobleman” status denied him by exile—it introduced something entirely new: “[R]acial difference,” as his literary dopplegänger Charles Marlow observes in one of Conrad’s first seafaring stories, “shapes the fate of nations.”

Conrad saw firsthand the dark side of free trade. In the South Pacific he sailed with a mostly Asian crew, itself divided by status: The cooks and stewards were Chinese; Indians worked below deck; Malays and Filipinos served as quartermasters. Singapore was the staging port from which British merchant ships, including Conrad’s, traded opium, ran guns, and smuggled slaves. In so doing, they transformed cultures and destabilized politics throughout the archipelagoes of the South Seas, and then propped up local potentates to maintain order and supervise the extraction of whatever local crop or mineral was entering the global market.

Conrad’s most famous journey was, of course, to the Congo. Hired by the Belgians to pilot a paddle steamer, Conrad, as he traveled upriver, saw corpses all around—here a “dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose,” there a “skeleton tied up to a post.” He quit, Jasanoff writes, before his contract was up. Malarial and exhausted, Conrad returned to London and would soon quit sailing altogether and commit himself to writing about it. Yet it was only after Heart of Darkness was published, in 1899, that he began to identify his time in Central Africa as a turning point in his intellectual development, the moment he became more alert to Europe’s artifices. “Before the Congo,” he’d say, “I was just a mere animal.”

Race and the “fate of nations” can be read as a constant preoccupation in Conrad’s writing, even in stories that weren’t, on their surface, about race. Set in 1880s London, The Secret Agent is an unflattering portrait of an anarchist cell and a bomb plot gone awry. Previous scholars have used the story to parse Conrad’s politics. (In 1885, he viewed a good electoral showing by Gladstone liberals as catastrophic: “the Alpine avalanche rolls quicker and quicker as it nears the abyss,” he wrote to a friend. “Where’s the man to stop the rush of social-democratic ideas?”) Conrad, though, always insisted that The Secret Agent wasn’t a polemic about radicals but an effort to capture the futility of human ambition, its “miseries” and “credulities.” Jasanoff takes him at his word, using the story to illuminate Conrad’s early years in London. The Secret Agent, she says, reveals “the tragic irony” of Conrad’s split émigré
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experience, as London, confronted with a wave of Irish-republican bombings, became a less welcoming place for foreigners. The story’s irony, though, could be related not just to Conrad’s London residency but also to the kind of hallucinatory terror he had witnessed in the Congo. “Exterminate all the brutes!” he had Heart of Darkness’ Kurtz scribble at the end of his political manifestos—a symbol of the author’s disillusionment with Europe’s civilizational fantasies. The Secret Agent, published in 1907, eight years after Heart of Darkness, hints at what it means for such disenchantment to be brought home to Europe; how the brutality of empire abroad had left the continent susceptible to a Nietzschean ethics of ruthless domination. One of its characters, the Professor, dreams of “a world like shambles, where the weak would be taken in hand for utter extermination” and where supermen will no longer be held hostage to the guilt-inducing claims of their inferiors, be they in Africa or London. “Exterminate, exterminate! That is the only way of progress,” the Professor says, sounding a lot like Kurtz. It might be a conservative conceit to equate colonialism’s systemic violence with that of marginal, dogmatic anarchists. Nonetheless, the insight is profound: Kurtz will be coming home.

Conrad “wouldn’t have known the word ‘globalization,’” writes Jasanoff, who uses the term often in her book. But for her, Conrad witnessed its dawn. As a merchant seaman he participated in, and as a writer he chronicled, all the changes that would bring about what she defines as globalization: an “interdependent economy, open borders, ethnically diverse and networked populations, international institutions and standards,” and “shared cultural reference points.” Those changes were hastened by the British Empire’s move away from mercantilism and toward free trade. London would continue to rule over its colonies, including India, and would soon establish new domains in Africa and the Middle East. But, in a process that started in the first half of the 1800s, the liberalization of the rules of commerce and shipping led to, in Jasanoff’s estimation, an unprecedented period of openness. There were “no restrictions on who could come into the country” that Conrad adopted as home, she writes, “no passports or visas required, no need to prove that you had means of support. Nobody could be forced into military service. Nobody could be jailed merely for saying or writing something against the establishment. Nobody got extradited on political grounds. Freedom turned London into Europe’s beachcomber,” and London, as a result of taking in drift-people like Conrad, was a “city settling into its own greatness.”

Jasanoff’s high opinion of the period is captured in a glaring error. “Europeans,” she writes, “had stopped coming to Africa for slaves in 1808.” This isn’t true. Jasanoff might here be referring to Britain’s 1807 abolition of its involvement in the international slave trade, and the fact that the Royal Navy did commit itself to intercepting slave ships leaving the continent. But Spain, Portugal, and France continued to raid Africa, as did, occasionally, Liverpool contrabandists. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database lists hundreds of ships sailing under European flags or originating directly from European ports, including Barcelona, Nantes, and Lisbon, taking humans out of Africa and bringing them to the Americas between 1809 and 1866.

Jasanoff’s gaffe is faithful to the kind of story she wants to tell us about this era, which takes the ever more cosmopolitan and laissez-faire British Empire (and especially its metropolis, London) as the baseline of what a good globalized society might look like—while largely ignoring how free trade was responsible for a variety of atrocities. Conrad was no innocent, in fact, to the violence of this new free-trade era, serving on a ship that smuggled slaves and guns between Singapore and Borneo—a fact that Jasanoff mentions, but only in passing.

Twenty years ago, shortly after we all learned the word “globalization,” Adam Hochschild’s King Leopold’s Ghost also explored the relationship of fact to fiction in Conrad’s writings, in particular what Heart of Darkness might say about Belgian colonialism in the Congo, which between 1885 and 1908 resulted in the deaths of an estimated 10 million Congolese, the victims of murder, exhaustion, starvation, exposure, and disease. Untold numbers more were tortured and mutilated. Hochschild wanted to be clear that Heart of Darkness should not be read as a general parable about a universal human capacity for violence. Conrad had a specific story to tell—one about the horrors of European violence in the Congo. Yet the novel was often cut “loose from its historical moorings” and taken as a “parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place.” Hochschild reminded readers that it was not just a morality tale about the fall from “Victorian innocence.” Rather, it was a “precise and detailed” account of a monstrous crime committed by a system that justified itself under the banner of free trade.

Jasanoff does exactly what Hochschild urges readers of Conrad not to do: She takes Heart of Darkness, along with Conrad’s other works, primarily as allegories revealing truths “about human nature itself.” In her discussion of the Congo Free State, Jasanoff also signals her belief that British liberalism offered a potentially more humane way of extracting resources from Africa, noting that the worst of Leopold’s crimes came only after he turned away from Victorian openness, after he rejected the kind of “free trade ethos” associated with his first cousin, Queen Victoria. Yet one might note that Victoria’s “free trade ethos” was equally barbaric. In the last decades of the 19th century, in South Asia, it destroyed local markets and subsistence food production, resulting, when natural disaster hit, in hunger of unimaginable proportions, even as the same ethos mandated a laissez-faire response to the crisis. As Indians begged colonial administrators to stop exporting food, they were told the market would sort itself out. Between 1876 and 1902, an estimated 13 million to 29 million people in British-controlled territory starved to death. The Belgians claimed they were suppressing cannibalism in the Congo with their brutal regime. The free-trade ethos created it in India, as some of the desperate devoured the dead.

By the end of The Dawn Watch, Jasanoff seems adrift, weighed down by her own metaphor-heavy prose. “A river is nature’s plotline: it carries you from here to there,” she writes. “You can’t tell a river’s source by standing midstream, but you can take the measure of its flow. Conrad’s imagination, like his experience, coursed over continents.” It’s not clear why Jasanoff followed Conrad’s path across the Indian Ocean and the Congo. She logged many miles, but the payoff is slight, offered up in a short epilogue: “What Conrad made me see, I realized, was a set of forces whose shapes may have changed but whose challenges have not.”

Jasanoff understands these challenges mostly as atavistic reactions against the kind
of “global openness” she believes London exemplified in the 1880s. The successors of the Irish republicans and anarchists who terrorized cosmopolitan cities in Conrad’s time, Jasanoff asserts, lurk in “Internet chat rooms or terrorist cells.” Brexit voters, she adds, would also have been familiar to Conrad as those whom “had seen earlier waves of xenophobia follow from a period of global openness.” And so Conrad’s “Congo story,” a “precise and detailed” description of one among many colonial crimes during the golden years of free-trade liberalism, is restored to its traditional function as a cautionary fable of what might result if liberalism were abandoned. Heart of Darkness, Jasanoff tells us, “had always been about more than one specific place”: It conveys the “universal potential for savagery.”

Writers have long appreciated the role that Conrad played in creating the moral imagination of the modern age, including many of the Latin American writers who, after his death, began to reinvent the historical epic as an avant-garde form. As a young diplomat in Colombo and Rangoon, Pablo Neruda read Conrad in English “under the shade of coconut trees,” identifying with his “strange, exiled and exterminated” creations. Jorge Luis Borges thought Conrad the greatest heir to the tradition of desengaño, the ironic skepticism that took hold of Spanish writers after that first moment of globalization—the conquest of America—led them to lose their Christian piety. Borges spun off stories from Conrad’s novels and identified the Polish-British writer as a bridge between Cervantes and what would come to be known as magical realism. Conrad, Borges said, purged the “supernatural” from his stories while making the everyday “marvelous.” Gabriel García Márquez, too, shared Conrad’s desengaño—his imagined Macondo in One Hundred Years of Solitude is, after all, destroyed—yet he rejected Conrad’s style of self-serving detachment, which presents history as tragedy to justify itself.

Conrad’s fatalism sharpened his ability to see through Victorian cant, to understand the way that terror on the margins will rebound into the heartland. But fatalism also allowed him the conceit of impunity. “I shall never need to be consoled for any act of my life,” Conrad said, on the cusp of launching his writing career, sounding much like The Secret Agent’s Nietzschean Professor, “because I am strong enough to judge my conscience instead of being its slave.” True freedom, Conrad wrote, meant rejecting the idea that guilt could be expiated through ritualized acts of contrition and self-implication, which is perhaps why Conrad refused not only to join the Congo Reform Association, but also to sign a petition pleading to spare Casement’s life after he was found guilty of running guns to Irish revolutionaries. “A truly tragic personality,” was how Conrad described him.

“Conrad was rightly skeptical about imperial promises of progress,” Jasanoff says, explaining (in an earlier essay) that her encounter with Congolese poverty brought her to a “hideous realization: Measured in relative terms, most people in Congo were probably better off 100 years ago.” That realization is left undeveloped. Is her point that all politics, both against and in defense of the empire of capital, is futile? She doesn’t say. But Jasanoff does identify Mobutu Sese Seko, installed by Washington, Paris, and Brussels in the early 1960s as the country’s long-running Cold War dictator, as “Congo’s modern-day Kurtz,” without mentioning the role that Western nations played in turning him into, as Conrad called his original, “a first-class agent.”

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ZOMBIE HISTORY
Timothy Snyder’s bleak vision of the past and present

by SOPHIE PINKHAM

Timothy Snyder is a Yale historian whose scholarly reputation rests on his wide-ranging histories of Central and Eastern Europe. Trained at Oxford, Snyder demonstrated a capacity for research in some 10 languages and a willingness to engage with many different areas of specialization; his colorful prose increased his work’s potential appeal for nonacademic readers, as did his ability to cover large swaths of territory and time. His most important early work, The Reconstruction of Nations, mapped the development of Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Belarusian nationhood from 1569 to 1999, and was met with wide acclaim from academic reviewers.

Capitalizing on his credentials as a historian, over the past decade Snyder has positioned himself as a public intellectual, shifting from academic histories to more popular works, writing for magazines like The New Republic and The New York Review of Books, and appearing often on the national and international speaking circuits. His first popular success was 2010’s Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin, which set out to tell the story of the millions of people—especially Jews, Ukrainians, and Poles—

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who were killed between 1933 and 1945 in the area between central Poland and western Russia. Drawing on a wide range of sources, Bloodlands offered a conceptual revision, grouping the victims of Hitler and Stalin together and arguing that the Nazi and Soviet governments spurred each other on to increased violence.

Among academics, Bloodlands was met with much praise but also with substantial criticism. The conflation of Stalinist and Nazi crimes seemed morally righteous to some but grossly reductive to others. The somewhat arbitrary temporal and geographical framework omitted important episodes of political violence in the region; by conflating Nazi and Soviet tactics, Snyder elided important differences between them—most notably that the Nazis explicitly planned to exterminate certain ethnic groups, while Soviet violence was more complex in its aims and methods, and more varied in its results. Snyder was also criticized for focusing on the intentions and actions of a select group of political leaders while giving short shrift to the many other historical forces at play, such as the actions of local governments and populations. Some critics bristled at his use of historical juxtapositions that implied connections without making clear arguments to establish them: for example, Bloodlands’ 1933 starting date, which suggested a link between Hitler’s seizure of power and the Ukrainian famine of that year.

But specialist criticism was drowned out by mainstream praise. The jacket of Snyder’s next book, Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning, featured the author as “our most distinguished historian of evil,” and also featured praise from Henry Kissinger (whose own evils fall, apparently, beyond Snyder’s purview). Building on Bloodlands’ argument that Nazi and Stalinist violence were mutually catalytic, Black Earth offered an eccentric interpretation of the Holocaust as a phenomenon produced largely by Hitler’s ecological anxieties about food scarcity and by the Nazi and Stalinist destruction of states. For Snyder, Hitler “was not a German nationalist.... He was a zoological anarchist.” That Hitler rose to power by capturing state institutions and that the Holocaust was perpetrated with the help of technology and sophisticated organization at the level of the state did not hamper Snyder’s argument: He views the stability afforded by state institutions more as a source of “moral illumination” than as a potential basis for the legitimation of violence and repression. Black Earth went further than Bloodlands in providing a presentist moral primed for the op-ed pages: Given the threats to the global food supply posed by climate change, Snyder warned, there was a grave risk that a Nazi-like regime would rise.

After Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and a Russian-backed uprising in Ukraine’s eastern regions the same year, Snyder began to direct a considerable amount of his energy to the present, writing often about the events in Ukraine for The New Republic and The New York Review of Books. As someone with a profound knowledge of the region’s history, culture, and languages, Snyder could have provided a much-needed corrective to the glib, uninformed assessments of many of the Western politicians, pundits, and self-anointed experts who commented on the crisis. But his Manichaean vision of an ideological struggle between Russia and the West, between tyranny and freedom, led him to consistently overemphasize Russia’s “fascism” and its threat to Europe and the United States and to play down the significance of continued corruption in Ukrainian politics as well as the country’s small but forceful faction of ultranationalists.

In the aftermath of Trump’s election, Snyder’s stock as a political commentator skyrocketed. He scored a best seller with his pamphlet On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century, which began as a Facebook post. On the crest of panic about Trump’s authoritarian tendencies, Snyder unveiled such deathless maxims as “Defend institutions,” “Believe in truth,” “Be a patriot,” “And make eye contact and small talk.” Though one of his “lessons” was “Avoid pronouncing the phrases every one else does.... Make an effort to separate yourself from the internet,” he launched a series of YouTube lectures, “Timothy Snyder Speaks,” on the Russian conspiracy and crisis of American democracy.

Snyder’s latest book, The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America, marks the next phase in his transformation from academic historian to political commentator; it is also the apotheosis of a certain paranoid style that has emerged among liberals in Trump’s wake. The book’s cover comes complete with helpful directional indicators: “Russia > Europe > America”—the road to unfreedom is a one-way street. For Snyder, Russia is to blame for the growth of the “birther” conspiracy theory about Barack Obama, stoking the Scottish independence referendum, Brexit, the rise of the far right in various European countries, and the Syrian refugee crisis. Russia is also in cahoots with the National Rifle Association and has been sowing dissension in the United States by encouraging hostility between the police and African Americans. Putin’s “grandest campaign” of all, though, was his “cyberwar to destroy the United States of America” by “escorting” Trump to the American presidency.

Putin would no doubt love to play puppet master in American and European politics. He is certainly pleased by the international belief in his vast, malevolent power, which is helping him to create the illusion that Russia has regained its status as a global superpower, and that he is personally responsible for this restored prestige. But Snyder’s picture of Putin’s campaign to destroy America is unconvincing. Rather than building an argument based on evidence, he often cherry-picks news items to make a tendentious case, relying heavily on the kinds of leading phrases endemic to conspiratorial thinking—“Interestingly,” “It was no secret,” and “It was also noteworthy”—that serve as substitutes for genuine evidence of a causal relationship between two factors or incidents.

For instance, on refugees and the far right, Snyder tells us: “The German government announced that it planned to take half a million refugees per year. By no coincidence, Russia began bombing Syria three weeks later.... Russia would bomb Syria to generate refugees, then encourage Europeans to panic. This would help the AfD [Alternative für Deutschland, the right-wing German party], and thus make Europe more like Russia.” Snyder offers nothing to prove that Russia began bombing Syria because of the German government’s announcement, and a glance at the international news shows that Russia is far from the only country “generating refugees.” But here and elsewhere, Snyder uses
coincidence to establish causation.

This kind of argumentation occurs throughout The Road to Unfreedom. “The first order of business for Russian foreign policy in the United Kingdom,” Snyder tells us at another point, “was actually Scottish separatism.” Again, he supplies no evidence whatsoever that the independence referendum was the product of Russian plotting; nor does he discuss why the Scots themselves may have conceived the idea of splitting from Great Britain. Instead, he details the Russian media’s false reports about the potential ill effects of Scotland remaining in the UK and describes Russia’s post-referendum attempts to promote the idea that the vote had been rigged. It is disturbing, of course, that Russia was trying to spread false information and sow doubt about the legitimacy of Scotland’s democratic processes; but the majority of Scottish voters rejected separatism, and the referendum results stand.

Snyder takes a similar approach to Brexit and Trump, downplaying the role of homegrown political forces and exaggerating the decisiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns. “In 2016,” he writes, “the British voted to leave the European Union, as Moscow had long advocated, and Americans elected Donald Trump as their president, an outcome Russians had worked to achieve.” But just because Russia may have desired or attempted to contribute to these outcomes doesn’t mean Russia caused them. To make that argument, one needs evidence of an organized plan of action, as well as proof that this plan exerted a decisive effect on voting behaviors.

Snyder rails against Russia’s blanket rejection of facts and objectivity and writes that Western journalists, by contrast, are “taught to report various interpretations of the facts.” But despite his many footnotes, he does not seem to follow this practice himself, even when presenting interpretations that are widely disputed by reputable scholars and journalists. This one-sidedness is particularly glaring in his depiction of Russia’s attitude toward the EU, NATO, and the United States. His book’s time frame is curiously short; he makes it sound as if Russia “turned against the European Union” in 2013, in some kind of instant about-face, because “its success might encourage Russians to think that former empires could become prosperous democracies.” But Russia’s relationship with the EU, and especially with the US and NATO, had been deteriorating for some time. Russia certainly uses these “external enemies” as foils in its domestic propaganda, but there were specific geopolitical reasons for its growing hostility, notably the eastward expansion of the EU and NATO after the end of the Cold War, as well as NATO’s 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, which infuriated Russia. These factors would be clearer with a wider time frame and a fuller consideration of the actions of the West as well as those of Russia. But Snyder is unwilling to make the slightest effort to imagine that Russia might have any strategic concerns that go beyond its plot against freedom.
Snyder devotes an entire section of The Road to Unfreedom to the work of Russian philosopher and theorist Ivan Ilyin, whom he presents as the single most important influence on contemporary Russian policy. Born in 1883, Ilyin advocated at an early age for the rule of law in Russia and then for violent resistance to the Bolsheviks. He left Russia for Germany in 1922 and eventually conceived what Snyder calls a “Christian fascism” as an antidote to Bolshevism. Believing that communism had been inflicted on innocent Russia by the West, Ilyin was convinced, according to Snyder, that his brand of “fascism” would liberate Russia and turn it into the world’s hope for Christian salvation. For a time, this led Ilyin to view Mussolini and Hitler as bulwarks against civilization-destroying communism, but his refusal to disseminate Nazi propaganda caused the Nazis to ban him from employment. In 1938, he left Germany for Switzerland, where he died in obscurity in 1954.

Ilyin does have significance for Putin, who in 2005, at the behest of an Orthodox/monarchist faction of the Russian elite, ordered the transfer of his remains from Switzerland to Moscow and the repatriation of his papers from Michigan State University. Putin has quoted Ilyin in several important speeches, as have Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and former deputy prime minister and Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov. In 2014, the Kremlin even sent a collection of Ilyin’s political publications—along with books by two much more famous Russian philosophers, Nikolai Berdiaev and Vladimir Soloviev—to members of the ruling party and to civil servants. But for Snyder, Ilyin is not just one of many Russian thinkers revived by Russia’s current political players; instead, he insists that “no thinker of the twentieth century has been rehabilitated in such grand style in the twenty-first, nor enjoyed such influence on world politics.”

This is an overstatement, to put it mildly. As Marlene Laruelle, a leading expert on Russian nationalism, notes, Putin has cited many other Russian thinkers far more often, and by her count has only quoted Ilyin five times. His Ilyin quotes are, moreover, hardly the radical statements of Christian fascism that Snyder would have us expect—for instance, “our country is still sick, but we did not flee from the bed of our sick mother.” Snyder comments that this remark “suggested that Putin had been reading rather deeply in the Ilyin corpus,” but it might also suggest that some assistant selected this rather generic thought for inclusion in speeches that needed the imprimatur of Russian philosophy, or a dog whistle to nationalists. Likewise, some of the aspects of Putin’s rhetoric that Snyder ascribes to Ilyin’s influence are in fact manifestations of longer-running themes in Russian political thought. In a 2012 article on the national question, Putin quoted Ilyin in reference to Russia’s supposed ability to bring peace and harmony
to an ethnically and religiously diverse empire. Though expressed in Ilyin’s words, this idea is much older; it was important, for example, in rhetoric about Catherine the Great’s annexation of Crimea in 1783. (Putin’s relatively tolerant attitude toward Islam within Russia and the power he has allowed leaders like the Chechen Muslim warlord Ramzan Kadyrov do not fit with Snyder’s theory of Russia as a state influenced by “Christian fascism” and are never discussed in The Road to Unfreedom.) Snyder also tries to attribute to Ilyin’s philosophy practices that have long been standard in authoritarian regimes, including the Soviet Union. Russian election fraud thus becomes not simply a way of keeping power while maintaining a veneer of democracy, or a return to the sham elections of the Soviet era, but rather an enactment of Ilyin’s proposal for ritual elections. Along similar lines, for Snyder, Russia’s claims that the United States—and particularly Hillary Clinton—orchestrated the 2011–12 Moscow protests are not merely a classic Soviet-style tactic of blaming internal dissent on external enemies; they are manifestations of Ilyin’s theory that elections are only an opening for sinister foreign influence. (Did Ilyin teach liberal America that the 2016 election was rigged by Putin?) According to Snyder, Ilyin’s work is “fascism adapted to make oligarchy possible”—and yet, as countless historical examples (and etymology) show, oligarchy is entirely possible without fascism, and long predates it.

This fixation on Ilyin jibes with Snyder’s tendency to focus on the influence of solitary thinkers and politicians while downplaying the power of broader social, economic, and historical forces. The flip side of the “great man” theory of history is conspiratorial thinking: the idea that all malign developments can be traced back to a cabal of bad men, or perhaps just one, pulling the strings behind the scenes. With characteristic hyperbole, Snyder writes, “Ilyin’s thought began with a contemplation of God, sex, and truth in 1916 and ended a century later as the orthodoxy of the Kremlin and the justification for war against Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States.” Leaving aside the fact that it is a gross exaggeration (and an insult to Ukraine, which is suffering terribly from a real war that has now lasted four years) to say that Russia is waging war on the EU and the US, it is laughable to say that it was Ilyin’s ideas that motivated Russian belligerence. The immediate trigger for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, of course, was not Ilyin but the ouster of a Russia-friendly president, Viktor Yanukovych, after months of pro-EU protests, and the imminent possibility that Russia would lose access to its naval base in Sevastopol, in Crimea. Moreover, Russia did not want to cede influence over Ukraine, with its close cultural and economic ties with Russia, to the EU and the United States, which openly sought to bring Ukraine into their orbit. One doesn’t need Ilyin to see the realpolitik at work.

A central theme in The Road to Unfreedom is an opposition between what Snyder calls the “politics of inevitability” and the “politics of eternity.” The first, embodied by the United States pre-Trump, is a linear “end of history” idea that the world is moving inexorably toward liberal democratic capitalism, and that there is thus no need to worry about the shortcomings of the existing system (such as mounting economic inequality and a feeling of disenfranchisement among ordinary people). The fatal weakness of the “politics of inevitability” is that it is incapable of taking seriously the many signs that liberal democracy is not inevitable, and that it is in fact becoming increasingly vulnerable. In Snyder’s view, this is the weakness that made Trump’s election, Brexit, and the rise of the anti-EU far right possible, and that Russia exploited.

In “the politics of eternity,” which Snyder identifies with Russia and with “fascism” in general, politics is a cycle of victimhood in which “no one is responsible because we all know that the enemy is coming no matter what we do...progress gives way to doom.” Eternity politics sounds a lot like cable news: “To distract from their inability or unwillingness to reform, eternity politicians instruct their citizens to experience elation and outrage at short intervals, drowning the future in the present.” The great risk, in Snyder’s eyes, is that the blindness of the politics of inevitability will give way to the nihilism of the politics of eternity. This is a remarkably reductive explanatory framework, especially for a historian who built his career on the study of the intricacies and contingencies that shaped Eastern Europe.

Another kind of peril lies in the prose produced by this theory: “Eternity arises from inevitability like a ghost from a corpse,” Snyder tells us. “The natural successor of the veil of inevitability is the shroud of eternity, but there are alternatives that must be found before the shroud drops. If we accept eternity, we sacrifice individuality, and will no longer see possibility. Eternity is another idea that says that there are no ideas.” Snyder is especially fond of inversions (“Perhaps we are slipping from one sense of time to another because we do not see how history makes us, and how we make history”; “Must any attempt at novelty be met with the cliché of force and the force of cliché?”) and sentences that consist entirely of rhythmic abstractions that convey very little ("As we emerge from inevitability and contend with eternity, a history of disintegration can be a guide to repair"). One of his favorite images in the book is the abyss: so empty and so frightening. This gives us “Having transformed the future into an abyss, Putin had to make flailing at its edge look like judo,” but also “Under the mistaken impression that they had a history as a nation-state, the British (the English, mainly) voted themselves into an abyss where Russia awaited.” Truly the abyss swallows up all meaning.

In The Road to Unfreedom, Snyder’s conspiratorial thinking undermines his own insistence on the importance of individual responsibility. (“Do not obey in advance,” “Take responsibility for the face of the world,” and “Be reflective if you must be armed” were three more of On Tyranny’s “lessons from the twentieth century.”) His belief in a boundlessly cunning Putin, along with his desire to trace many social ills back to a single source, leads him to elide the crucial role played by voters in electing Trump or passing Brexit.

Snyder does not go so far as to say that Russia altered vote counts, but he seems intent on minimizing the role of American voters as free human beings who in some cases chose to believe, for example, that Hillary Clinton was a child-sacrificing bride of Satan. Along similar lines, Snyder discusses the Russian role—which was in-
deed decisive—in eastern-Ukrainian separatism but, except for a few offhand references, ignores the large numbers of disaffected eastern Ukrainians who participated in it.

To the end of his book, Snyder takes on the American opioid crisis, linking it to the “zombification” of Russians and Ukrainians by political propaganda. “Zombification was as pronounced in America as it was in eastern Ukraine,” he writes. “People in Portsmouth with unwashed hair and gray faces could be seen tearing the metal objects from one another’s houses, carrying them through town, and selling them for pills.” He suggests that Trump’s victory can be blamed in part on drug-induced brain changes: “Opioids hinder the development of the frontal cortex of the brain, which is where the capacity to make choices forms in adolescence. Persistent opioid use makes it harder for people to learn from experience, or to take responsibility for their actions.... The correlation between opioid use and Trump voting was spectacular and obvious, notably in the states that Trump had to win.”

This is yet another of Snyder’s abuses of correlation, and the suggestion that people addicted to opioids are brain-damaged zombies is just the kind of dehumanizing rhetoric that one might have hoped such a champion of individuality and dignity would have rejected. This vision of a zombified America is also profoundly antidemocratic. Snyder’s insistence on institutions as agents of “moral illumination” makes a new kind of sense as a manifestation of mistrust in popular politics, a Hamiltonian fear of the impressionable rabble.

In a recent interview with Slate about The Road to Unfreedom, Snyder used his favorite rhetorical crutch to outline what he sees as some of the salutary effects of the Cold War:

It’s no coincidence that most of the Cold War—the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s—coincides with two very important developments: giving African Americans the right to vote and the creation of a social welfare state, plus generally the endorsement or at least the tolerance of labor unions, which allowed for wealth inequality to close. In the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s, the gap between the top 1 percent and the bottom 90 percent was actually closing in the United States. That’s actually related to the Cold War. It’s related to the fact that the United States couldn’t allow the Soviet Union to make too much of our racial and class problems.

The Cold War did, of course, play an important role in mid-century American politics. But this notion of American politics as a game between two rival states ignores the essential role played by non-state organizers and activists. (It is especially galling that Snyder made this statement on the eve of the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.) The right to vote was not given but won, at the cost of many lives and in the face of bitter opposition from much of the American political establishment. The same is true of labor rights—and of course the American labor movement, which has included many episodes of violent repression of striking workers, long predated the Cold War. In On Tyranny, Snyder counseled his readers to “Remember Rosa Parks,” who broke the “spell of the status quo” by refusing to give up her seat on a bus. But how can such acts of courage liberate the zombified public Snyder describes? What happens when conspiracy theorists insist that activists are Russian dupes? The Road to Unfreedom offers a bleak vision of politics for future activists: one in which all change comes from above, and ordinary people cannot be trusted.
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LETTING TOO MUCH IN
Moby’s ravenous pursuit of authenticity

by BIJAN STEPHEN

It’s never been easy to make something new. Inspiration strikes; insight occurs; shit happens. The American electronic musician Richard Melville Hall, better known by the stage name Moby—yes, he’s related to Herman Melville—has always seemed a good example of that particular creative struggle. He’s spent the past three decades toiling away in the studio, making sure the conditions are right to bottle lightning in a Leyden jar, but it hasn’t always paid off. More than anything, the creative process operates at the level of faith and ritual, as a kind of prayer: Sometimes the void hears and answers, but more often the artist is left alone with his or her thoughts.

Everything Was Beautiful, and Nothing Hurt, Moby’s 15th studio album, sounds like the product of hours spent in fruitless supplication. It’s obvious that he took his time with the album, but musically, it feels teleported directly from 1999, the year that Moby’s breakthrough, Play, was released. That record, Moby’s fifth, came after a string of buzzy triumphs (Moby, 1992; Everything Is Wrong, 1995) and fan-base-alienating flops (1996’s Animal Rights). Play would become Moby’s calling card, the work that cemented his status as the savior of American electronic music; it was also one of the first albums ever to be licensed in its entirety, with its songs appearing in commercials, TV shows, and films. It turned Moby into an overnight pop sensation.

What drew listeners to Play was its amalgamation of sounds and styles that encapsulated trip-hop, which at the time was ascendant. Built around a series of field hollers sampled from an Alan Lomax box set, Sounds of the South, the album featured Moby’s moody electronic noodling over brooding beats. The result was textured, stuccoed, more architectural than sculptural. This approach worked on “Porcelain,” which could be heard in cocktail bars around the world and didn’t suffer from extensive sampling, but not so much on other cuts from the album. On “Honey,” a single that samples the singer Bessie Jones’s “Sometimes,” it feels like Jones’s art is carrying Moby’s; the juxtaposition is productive and not quite appropriative, but Moby’s electronic production is constantly fading into the background. The same

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thing happens on “Natural Blues,” another massively popular single. Moby sampled the blues singer Vera Hall’s “Trouble So Hard” and set it to relatively eclectic percussion and a propulsive piano line, which thankfully doesn’t lessen the power of Hall’s voice, though it can’t enhance it much, either.

The samples that Play’s songs are built around came from a place of authentic lived experience; in the cases of “Honey” and “Natural Blues,” both women were born black in 1902—into a world of segregation and outright discrimination. What the samples obscure are their biographies, the lives they went on to live after Lomax captured their singing for the Library of Congress, and the real power of their words. There have been many books written about the white pursuit of musical authenticity through black musicians, but a recent favorite, Hari Kunzru’s ghost story White Tears, puts the dilemma best. “On your record deck, you played the sound of the middle passage, the blackest sound. You wanted the suffering you didn’t have, the authority you thought it would bring,” Kunzru’s protagonist offers. “I never wanted the authority of suffering—I suspected it would have a bitter taste.” This is something that Play doesn’t quite understand; it doesn’t get that pastiche is not at all equivalent to real feeling.

Moby has obviously matured as an artist in the nearly two decades since Play made him a household name. His detours through different modes—ambient (Hotel, 2005), dance history (Last Night, 2008), and New Agey post-rock (Innocents, 2013)—have been, if not fruitful, at least propelled by a genuine curiosity. He’s been trying. Which is why Everything Was Beautiful, and Nothing Hurt is so baffling: It’s incurious, and it commits a cardinal musical sin by being boring as hell. The album finds Moby going back to the well that made him rich and famous, the speak-singing trip-hop so prominent on Play and its follow-up, 18 (2002). But here, it just feels old—as though the onetime pioneer had ignored the past decade of music.

Moby has described the video for “Mere Anarchy,” the first song on Everything, as a postapocalyptic trip. “People are gone, and my friend Julie and I are time traveling aliens visiting the empty Earth,” he told Rolling Stone in January. “Caution of the world you said was over / Caution where we were / Caution where we were / O-o-oh,” goes the chorus, which makes sense only in that it sounds like an alien—or a deeply alienated person—wrote it. As for the rest, there are odd, muted handclaps and a synth line that approximates a string section. The whole song is so anodyne that, after it’s done, it’s hard to remember what you just heard.

A couple of tracks later, “Like a Motherless Child” covers the chorus of the traditional Negro spiritual. Clearly Moby is reprising “Natural Blues” here, in spirit if not in its samples, but Raquel Rodriguez’s breathy vocals can’t compare with any version I’ve heard of the original. I would also be remiss not to note that the spiritual refers directly to the pain of slavery: the pain of being sold away from one’s mother, specifically, or of being alienated from Africa and yearning for one’s home. The song is old enough that we can’t know for sure, but the utter despair in it is the reason it’s stood the test of time: Across history, people have related to the pain of forced separation.

Yet in Moby’s corruption, the chorus is merely a backdrop for something nameless that frightens him. Pain is universal, of course, and the original “Motherless Child” is one of the best expressions of it, but Moby’s opacity obscures even what he’s hurt about. Honestly, I can’t tell what he’s trying to say or what he’s suffering from here:

This was loss, this was my name
This was my truth, this was no game
This was not hope, this was not sane
And from these broken places made
That was loss and this was later
I wanted less but nothing greater
I couldn’t leave, I couldn’t stay, sir
Like a motherless child

It reads like deeply felt slam poetry from a sheltered suburban 18-year-old. What else is there to say?

Most of the other songs are even worse: unearned, saccharine-sweet, and wispier experiments, ideas stretched out well past four minutes. “The Middle Is Gone,” a cut near the end of Everything, is classic Muzak: “I let too much in / And the souls begin / We were so much alive I couldn’t win / I had life pursuing sin / But I’ll never be free / Always plagued by what I can never be,” Moby sings. It’s as though he’s only just figured out the limits of his world, and that he’ll never be able to escape other people, even if they hurt him. “I tried so hard / Haven’t figured anything out / Left behind so much pain,” he says in the third verse. The production shimmers, but the words undercut any real feeling that it might produce. It feels a lot like coming across a fedora’d man with a guitar at a Greyhound station in San Francisco around 3 PM and watching him strum dissonant chords while he sings the word “Corporations!” over and over again.

That’s not to say Everything is all bad. The closing track, “A Dark Cloud Is Coming,” is yet another song fashioned from the Negro spirituals Moby loves so much—but this time it works. The production is relaxed, with a heavily reverbed guitar giving the song some air and life; the bass kick is feather-light, and it moves the song along at a pleasantly loping pace. Again, as with the various singles from Play, it’s not the song’s composition that does most of the work, but the singer’s voice. Apollo Jane’s alto is languid, honey-thick, and soulful here; you believe her when she sings, “A dark cloud is coming / Yeah, a dark cloud is coming / Come for me now,” as though she’s decided to embrace the apocalypse and make her peace with death.

The album’s title, of course, is another reference to dying. It’s from Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five, a book about what it means to die and about how that meaning is so often erased. “If you think death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I’ve said,” Vonnegut’s protagonist says just before his own death. Why Moby picked one of the novel’s more famous quotations as his album title isn’t immediately obvious, but it’s clear that Everything Was Beautiful, and Nothing Hurt is an attempt to wrestle with the larger questions of one’s being in the world—of the fact of one’s mortality, as an artist and as a living thing. But even good art can’t save you from the end. So it goes.
THE LONG GOODBYE

In the absence of revolution, Perry Anderson turns to realism

by BRUCE ROBBINS

Published in the late 1940s, a decade after his death, the Italian volumes of Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* started the process of his secular canonization. A founder of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci had spent 11 years in Fascist custody. During this period, while his teeth fell out and his health failed, Gramsci filled 3,000 notebook pages with reflections on anything and everything he believed was relevant to Italian history and politics, and the prospects for the left in Europe. To get past the prison censors, he did so in coded, sometimes enigmatic abstractions. In 1937, still in Fascist custody, he died never having seen one of his two sons. At the time, he was mourned by his Communist comrades but by few outside those circles, and certainly fewer outside of Italy.

Today, Gramsci is a household name; one no longer hears it pronounced as if he

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**The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci**
By Perry Anderson
Verso. 192 pp. $24.95

**The H-Word**
*The Peripeteia of Hegemony*
By Perry Anderson
Verso. 208 pp. $26.95

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA VENTURA
were Polish. In college courses devoted to intellectuals, or Marxism, or political theory, students routinely learn of his insistence that consequential political action happens in realms, like culture, that had not heretofore seemed politically consequential. In this scheme, intellectuals become particularly important for Gramsci—not because he thinks attention should be paid to noncelebrities as well as to the talking heads in mass media, though he does, but because, as he understands power, the work of intellectuals is essential both to maintaining it (from above) and to taking it (from below). And much of that work, which goes on outside of the limelight, involves listening and adapting to those who don’t share your cultural values or political goals. The exercise of hegemonic leadership—a leadership by consent—can never occur without some element of concession to those who are led. In emphasizing the role that culture and civil society play in politics, Gramsci was telling the left that it had to lead—or rule—in a social landscape that seemed alien to it and that could easily be dismissed, then and now, as apolitical and even toxic to genuine left-wing commitments. To an extent that remains remarkable, given that he lived under Fascism and we live under various styles of liberal democracies, his landscape has become ours.

Perry Anderson has published two new books on Gramsci and hegemony, the term that has come to stand as the capstone of the latter’s political theory. The first, a long essay on Gramsci originally published in 1976 in the New Left Review, emphasizes the importance of hegemony to the revolutionary Marxist tradition of Lenin and company, from which Gramsci borrowed the concept and to which, Anderson argues, he remained more loyal than his modern admirers want to think. The second book, pulling back from the specifics of Gramsci’s thought, takes a more expansive view: It begins with Herodotus and Thucydides, spends some time on Confucian theories of wise rule, returns to Lenin and Gramsci, and carries the story forward to take in newer Gramscians like Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and more recent theorists of international relations. In both books, Anderson’s implicit subject is not so much what the left would have to do in order to lead—that was Gramsci’s great and perhaps tragic theme—but rather whether it even makes sense anymore to bother oneself with that question.

Who remembers, today, “the dictatorship of the proletariat”—the notion that, in the transition from capitalism to communism, total control would have to be exercised by the working class? Anderson believes Gramsci never abandoned it entirely. But what Gramsci is known for is the boldness with which he moved away from it. Conditions had changed (he was not the only one to notice this) between the revolutionary Russia of 1917 and the liberal democracies, some years later, of a relatively stable and prosperous Western Europe. In the West, power had entrenched itself in civil society as well as in a more modern, more democratic, more politically attractive form of the state. This meant that the left’s tactics would have to adapt themselves to this very different terrain. The storming of the barricades was no longer going to work. At the same time, for socialist militants, the deeply undemocratic history of how liberal democracies had come into being, with their structural neglect of (in the case of Italian unification) the peasants of the South, like the Sardinians Gramsci had grown up among, had provided opportunities as well as challenges. It made less sense to exercise dictatorship over other classes and more sense to seek alliance with them. Gramsci didn’t prescribe an electoral path to power, but it’s not hard to see how many would read him as pointing in that direction. Politics, for him, had to be respected as a relatively autonomous activity that was irreducible to class identity. Working-class militants would have to make a cultural and ideological appeal to groups that did not share working-class interests or values. The capitalistic class had consolidated its power in much of Europe by making that appeal in reverse: It had learned to say at least some things that the working class wanted to hear.

Anderson modestly forgoes any claim to have discovered Gramsci for the English-speaking left, but he and his colleagues at the New Left Review probably did more than anyone else to demonstrate how inspiring the analysis of Italy’s arrested development, as worked out by the then mostly obscure Italian thinker, could be. What Gramsci did for Italy, Anderson and his colleague Tom Nairn tried, in the 1960s, to do for Britain: to explain why their own country—and, for that matter, many others in the North Atlantic—suffered from a similar blockage. Measuring Britain’s deviation from a revolutionary line of development, the so-called Anderson-Nairn theses emphasized the relative timidity of the country’s left-liberal theorists, the snobbish eagerness of its bourgeoisie to imitate and melt into the old landowning aristocracy, and the acquiescence of the working class, bought off in part with the proceeds of empire (to which it did not loudly object) and relatively satisfied by traditional forms of life or new habits of mass consumption, and therefore uninterested in taking up its responsibility to represent the nation as a whole. The result was too much social stability and not enough political dynamism.

What, then, was to be done? As Gregory Elliott notes in Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History, both the “diagnosis of the singularities of British history and society” and the “prognosis for British socialism” were Gramscian. Ironically, Elliott adds, “the
strategy it sketched is a premonition of the Eurocommunism”—the electoral turn taken by many of Europe’s Communist parties, including Italy’s, in the 1970s—that Anderson later opposed. In the preface to his 2017 edition of his Gramsci essay, Anderson conveniently forgets his own early concurrence with Eurocommunism, but he does note with satisfaction that the compromises with liberal and social-democratic parties turned out to be suicidal for the Communists in Italy.

Critics like Nicos Poulantzas complained at the time that the Anderson-Nairn theses gave excessive importance to subjectivity: They cared too much about, say, the aristocratic ethos in which the mill owners wrapped themselves, underplaying the fact that, beneath that ideological camouflage, the new industrial bourgeoisie was in fact running the show. In both The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci and The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony, Anderson makes a similar complaint about Gramsci’s followers: that, encouraged by an erroneous interpretation of hegemony and thus making a potentially fatal mistake about the pliability of power, everyone else is giving excessive importance to ideology and culture. Eurocommunism is the conspicuous example for the first book, Stuart Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism for the second.

One might have expected that in his criticisms of Gramsci and the Gramscians, a Marxist like Anderson would have shifted the emphasis back from the cultural superstructure to the economic base. But that’s not what happens. What both books set against culture and ideology is not economics but physical coercion: military force as a—perhaps even the—decisive component of power, hence as perhaps the determining factor in history. Questions of how glaring a deviation this is from Marxist orthodoxy (if such a thing still exists) will certainly be of interest to those who look up to Anderson as a Marxist guru. But these questions are finally less interesting than Anderson’s impotent insistence that coercion, not class or modes of production, is the heart of history. Getting away from an emphasis on coercion—call it dictatorship of the proletariat, or think of the barricades—is usually seen as Gramsci’s most salient accomplishment in reinterpreting the concept of hegemony. The major intention behind both of Anderson’s books is getting back to it.

In Antinomies, Anderson does this by showing that Gramsci’s source for hegemony was the debates among Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, before 1917, about the proper role to be played by the proletariat in a revolution everyone initially assumed would have to first be bourgeois. How much of a sacrifice should be made to the values of the capitalists or the peasants? In that context, Lenin argued that it was only by taking a hegemonic, or leading, role vis-à-vis other classes that the proletariat could truly become a class. Gramsci flipped the concept so that it could also describe the means by which the bourgeoisie came to rule over other classes, again via compromise or concession—but, Anderson says, he nevertheless got it from Russia. His “own treatment of the idea of hegemony descends directly from the definitions of the Third International.”

In The H-Word, Anderson goes back further in hegemony’s past, tracing the concept to ancient Greece in order to show the somewhat different meanings of hegemony in contexts like the Peloponnesian War or, earlier, the Greek military alliance against Persia. Put in an international context rather than a domestic one, hegemony is, or at least appears to be, less a matter of consent—its big political selling point for liberal democracies—and more a matter of coercion. (This is one reason why political thinkers who assume that there is no meaning in history except “dog eat dog” naturally gravitate to the international domain—that’s where their premise seems most plausible.) As Anderson shows, ancient Greek authors sometimes used hegemonia as a synonym for arkbē, or rule, and sometimes allowed it to suggest the existence of another sort of rule—perhaps morally superior—that involved some degree of common interest and therefore consent.

Anderson is cynical about this second kind of rule, hegemonia—the variant most commonly associated with Gramsci—and the context of Athenian empire and military alliance provides support for his cynicism. Here and later, Anderson tends to see hegemony in this less than completely coercive sense as a moralistic disguise masking the will to dominate and, if necessary, to destroy. Coercion, in Anderson’s view, is the true essence of power. He writes that in the fourth century, after the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, “Athenian oratory, no longer able to extol empire as before, revalued the virtues of hegemony, now suitably moralized as an ideal of the weakened.” The suggestion runs throughout the book that many on today’s left also moralize from a position of weakness—because they are not tough-minded enough to see power for what it really is.

Anderson’s view of power expresses one strain of materialism, but it is materialism of an undialectical, ahistorical sort. It leans on an undoubted reality—there is no doubting the exercise of military and police violence—but does nothing to explain, for example, how, why, and when certain agents gain or lose their coercive power: what allows it to be exercised or, on the contrary, what determines that it will not be determining. Anderson has never had any time for sociology, but perhaps the sociologists of power and violence could have been of use here. Without their sensitivity to what determines the exercise of violence, how convincing is Anderson’s version of hegemony? Not very. Continuing his long-standing feud with Stuart Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism, which he thought focused too much on the appeal of her right-wing ideology, Anderson objects that Thatcherite hegemony was defined by violence. As evidence, he offers the crushing of the miners’ strike and the war in the Falklands, but neither example accounts for Margaret Thatcher’s electoral success as well as Hall’s concept of “authoritarian populism,” a savvy combination of law—and-order nationalism below with a no-holds-barred untethering of the cosmopolitan financial sector above.

Writing in these pages in 2010, Mark Mazower noted Anderson’s attraction to “tough-minded realists,” including “realists” who are in no sense leftists, like the neocon Robert Kagan. In The H-Word, Anderson praises John Mearsheimer, not for his exposure of the pro-Israel lobby but for his “unsentimental realism, capable of calling things by their name.” E.H. Carr, whose sympathies extended at moments both to Stalin’s Russia and to Hitler’s Germany, gets by my count 14 deferential mentions in the index of The H-Word, third in line behind Lenin and Gramsci. What appeals to Anderson about Carr is that he is also a realist about international power, refreshingly cynical toward those who seek to moralize that power by calling it by some other, more pious name.

Distinguish for the pieties of the left, as pronounced as that is in Anderson’s writing, is not quite enough to explain this perversion of appreciation. It also hints at the darkly seductive appeal of a (supposed) realism that would give up on leftist commitments entirely, leaving behind a resigned sense that the world will continue to work, as it has always worked, on the model of playground bullying. After all, he might say, what social forces are visible on the scene today that...
might give some other shape to all the bullying and change my mind? Man is and always will be a wolf to man.

To some, Anderson’s realism will also look like something else: stoicism (the term is worth underlining). In the absence of a revolution that might transform power into something else, one must accept it for what it is. But one might also say that, as a would-be stoic, Anderson too readily abandons the sense of the historian’s vocation, which demands an interpretive plunge beneath the frothy surface of events, the seizing of a structure that is more solid than violence. Anderson’s term for the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is “adventures.” Were these wars indeed merely adventures—which is to say, freely willed acts of bad judgment? Or was the US government pushed into these expensive fiascoes by economic or geopolitical imperatives that follow from its attempt to maintain its global hegemony? These questions—resembling those posed by scholars about the “necessity” invoked by imperial Athens before it wiped out Melos—should at least be named, and ideally addressed directly, if one wants to know how much military force does and does not count in the making of world history. Realism, properly conceived, demands that we know whether there is another coerciveness (for example, economic) behind physical coercion.

In his analysis of stoicism in The Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel suggested that the stoic was willing to think of the world as a chaos of meaningless, unrelated particulars because, by so doing, he was able to safeguard his inner freedom, his aloofness from the world. The joint temptation of aloofness and randomness makes it possible for him to understand the structure and evolution of whole societies, are the involuntary resultant of a dual-uity or plurality of voluntary class forces clashing with each other,” Anderson asks, “what explains their ordered nature? Why should the intersection of rival collective wills not produce the random chaos of an arbitrary, destructured log-jam?”

Writing in 1980, he seemed relatively confident that order could indeed be perceived, if only one was willing to give up insisting on agency and pay heed, instead, to the slow, impersonal march of modes of production. Having now lost patience with the pace of this march, Anderson opens his violence-centered historical vision to a similar critique. As in the case of Thompson’s agency, is it not just “the random chaos of an arbitrary, destructured log-jam”?

What is the role—or function, or significance—of Marxist thought in a time when the triumph of the working class doesn’t appear to be on the agenda? As many observers have pointed out, it remains indispensible for tracking capital, including capital’s devastating effects on the environment. On the question of how much of a cohesive program can emerge from the diverse progressive voices making the most noise of late, the jury is still out. But the noise level itself at least argues against preemptive melancholy. And that includes voices raised against, say, US militarism and for the victims of global economic inequality. As a habitual de-provincializer, Anderson should be able to see that. Since the 1960s, when he forced the English to read Gramsci and factor the existence of empire into their analyses of class, he has always been ahead of the curve on international issues. It may be that his willingness to exchange realism for realism is, among other things, an indirect way of registering today’s international brutalities, which are also brutal in their impact on a left whose analyses and strategies often remain largely domestic in their scope.

Still, the bleakness of Anderson’s world—a place with very little reason, let alone reason for hope—isn’t the only alternative to keeping faith with capital-R revolution. In order to save his or her intellectual self-respect, the writer need not sacrifice solidarity with those who have had little access to higher education and may not therefore follow all of the references. One thing demonstrated by Anderson’s on-again, off-again love affair with the R-word is the risk that, judged by that high standard, all other desires and commitments will seem trivial and random by contrast. As in erotic relationships, that position seems less an objective reflection of how things are than a self-fulfilling prophecy. Luckily, it is far from all one will take away from reading him.

“The thought of a genuinely original mind,” Anderson writes of Gramsci, “will typically exhibit—not randomly but intelligibly—significant structural contradictions.” What is true of Gramsci is also true, of course, of Perry Anderson himself. The contradictions are not random, but structural and intelligible. More important, this is true of the historical reality that both Gramsci and Anderson have done so much to illuminate.
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hey gave a bitch two options—stripping or lose,” snarls Cardi B over the dramatic piano pings and hazy synths of “Get Up 10.” It’s the opening line on her debut album, Invasion of Privacy, and a tone-setting declaration that reveals exactly where she’s coming from. For Cardi B, losing was never on the table.

So, as she says next, she took up dancing, “in the club right across from my school.” Much like Meek Mill’s “Dreams and Nightmares (Intro)” from 2012, or Detroit rhymer Tee Grizzley’s “First Day Out” from 2016, Cardi uses the theatricality of the slow-building production to lay out the stakes. When she raps, “I went from rags to riches / Went from WIC to lit / Only person in my fam to see six figures,” it’s difficult not to root for her.

A Bronx native born to Trinidadian and Dominican immigrants, Cardi hit the strip clubs after dropping out of college and being fired from her job as a grocery-store cashier—a decision that also provided the means to leave a toxic relationship. Her bold personality and hilariously blunt rants and one-liners (“A ho never gets cold,” she proclaims in one video) brought her social-media followers in droves, and she parlayed that popularity into a spot on VH1’s Love & Hip Hop: New York.

What some would consider missteps, Cardi B has turned into the stuff of stardom, and Invasion is her Odyssey, her own “Binderella” story, as she puts it—a momentous testament to perseverance.

In the modern era of rap, Cardi is perhaps the first woman to achieve pop-culture prominence without the direct assistance of a man. Her omnipresent breakout hit “Bodak Yellow” may take its cues from a song by a male rapper (Kodak Black’s “No Flockin”), but there was no co-signer, no superstar artist offering her a wave to ride or a place to stand next to him in videos. Her historic ascent included earning the No. 1 spot on the Billboard Hot 100 with “Bodak Yellow”—the second woman, after Lauryn Hill, to do so with a solo rap single. Invasion’s debut atop the Billboard 200 makes Cardi the fifth woman in rap to accomplish that feat.

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music is its unabashed sincerity. In a pop-culture moment where honesty is as much an earnest means of self-care as it is a commodity—appearances are, one way or another, always kept up—Cardi has the audacity to be messily imperfect. It’s what makes her so endearing. Her transparency creates room for the portion of her fans whose stories resemble hers to also feel a small bit of vindication.

On the buoyant “Best Life,” which gets a lift from hip-hop’s favorite optimist, Chance the Rapper, Cardi raps: “I never had a problem showing y’all the real me / Hair when it’s fucked up, crib when it’s filthy / Way-before-the-deal me / Strip-to-pay-the-bills me / Before I fixed my teeth / Man, those comments used to kill me.”

She has risen through rap’s ranks with every part of herself out front: her past as a stripper and reality-TV star, her ethnic roots, her Bronx-hood upbringing. No part of her life is off-limits for her own creative expression, and she has thereby become a beacon for all the brown and black girls whose hardships are often considered moral shortcomings and who have spent their lives shape-shifting to meet impossible standards.

“I Like It,” which features an immediately recognizable sample of Pete Rodriguez’s “I Like It Like That,” puts a spotlight on her Latina heritage. The trapped-out salsa beat provides the perfect backdrop, as Latin pop stars J Balvin, who is Colombian, and Bad Bunny, who is Puerto Rican, deliver verses in Spanish. The display of pride only adds to the many layers of being Cardi B. In a recent GQ interview, she admitted that her accent—English is her second language—is one of her insecurities and that she tries hard to suppress it. To many listeners, though, her drawl, the way her vowels elongate and her consonants cut off, is a signature that gives her music more character. And isn’t it often the case that the things we consider flaws are the things that others cherish most in us?

Elsewhere, her adoration for her fiancé, the Migos rapper Offset, suffuses the hook of the album’s second single, “Bartier Cardi.” But some of Invasion’s best moments come when Cardi is playing the role of the woman scorned. With her sights fixed on men who can’t ever seem to get their act together, she unleashes her most memorable lines yet. “Leave his texts on read, leave his balls on blue / Put it on airplane mode so none of those calls come through,” she declares on the ruthless “I Do.” The subject of her ire doesn’t fare as well on the searing “Thru Your Phone.” But by her own admission, Cardi is an “emotional gangsta,” so the aggression finds balance in the vulnerability captured in “Be Careful,” which samples Lauryn Hill’s “Ex Factor”: “You even got me trippin’, you got me lookin’ in the mirror different / Thinkin’ I’m flawed because you inconsistent.”

Two weekends after Invasion’s release, Cardi graced the Coachella stage, dressed in all white and wearing her pregnancy proudly. Like a reminder to those observers who still speak of her as a flash in the pan—and a middle finger to those who have sought to shame her—images from her past flashed across the screen behind her: photos from her dancing days, old Instagram posts, clips from Love & Hip Hop. Taking it a step further, acrobatic pole dancers swung themselves around as she ran through most of her album. (Imagine the breath control it takes to rap a full set in the desert heat while pregnant—to say nothing of dropping it low and twerking.) It felt like the big red bow on a career that has only been propelled by the fuel of naysayers. As Cardi raps on “I Do,” the album’s final song, “They said by now that I’ll be finished—hard to tell / My little 15 minutes lasting long as hell, huh?”
SERIOUS WORK
Jacqueline Rose and the politics of motherhood

by MERVE EMRE

I started Jacqueline Rose’s book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* on a winter afternoon when my children were sick. To keep misery at bay, I allowed my older son to watch *Peter Pan*, and while he was instantly absorbed in the adventures of Peter and the Lost Boys, I found myself distracted by the tragedy of Wendy Darling. Here was a bright, imaginative girl conscripted into playing mother to a vile little boy, a boy who seems to take great pleasure in pitting her against the sexier, more adventurous women in his life. Wendy is attacked by Tinker Bell, nearly drowned by the mermaids, cast aside for Tiger Lily. She is told that she talks too much, that she is a “big, ugly girl.” Each time she is insulted or hurt or almost dies, Peter laughs—a maniacal, braying laugh; the laugh of an idiot and sadist. But Wendy rarely complains or lashes out. Instead, she sings one of the sweetest, most pious songs about motherhood ever written: “Ask your heart to tell you her worth / Your heart will say, ‘Heaven on earth’ / Another word for divine / Your mother and mine.”

As I watched the movie, growing increasingly horrified by the spectacle of Wendy’s vulnerability and devotion, I began to feel the great urgency of the two questions that guide Rose’s *Mothers*: What is it about motherhood that gives rise to such love and such cruelty? What do we mean when we say, with Shakespeare, “the plagues of war are nothing to the plagues of peace”? Rose approaches these questions with an essayistic style that is both generous and exasperating. She sets up her long, meandering arguments with a focus on psychoanalysis, but by the time she reaches her conclusions, her explanations are often too simplistic and her analysis too superficial. When she writes about the “invisibility of suffering” or the “loss of recognition,” she seems to be talking about the world of literature, not the world of reality. She seems to think that she has found the answer to all the questions she asks, but she has not. She has only raised them anew.

Merve Emre is the author of *Paraliterary* and *The Personality Brokers*, a history of Myers-Briggs and the birth of personality testing that comes out in September. Starting in the fall, she will be associate professor of English at Oxford University.

*Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*
By Jacqueline Rose
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 256 pp. $26
ers that provokes hostility, abuse, and exploitation? And why, in the face of their bad treatment, do mothers continue to hold themselves to impossible standards of goodness and love? For Rose, the answer lies less in unequal laws (as it would for liberal feminists) or in capitalist relations (as it would for socialist feminists) than in the murkier, more intimate realm of the unconscious. The idea of motherhood operates as a kind of collective projection, an imaginary order that shapes our perspective of the kind of person a mother ought to be. Motherhood, Rose explains, is “the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human.”

As a literary scholar and psychoanalytic thinker, Rose has long insisted that we pay close attention to the subterranean fears, fantasies, and narratives that structure our most pressing sociopolitical problems: suicide bombings, honor killings, state-sanctioned terror. Her feminism takes its cues from this insight. Her previous book, the feminist treatise *Women in Dark Times*, called for a “scandalous feminism,” one that supplants pleas for equality and power with radical self-interrogation. If men and women are to fully realize their humanity, they need to be willing to go beyond the sanitized slogan that “the personal is political” and instead “enter the landscape of the night,” confronting “dark with dark.” One must meet certain fears head-on, unflinchingly, with passion and even pleasure: the fear of pain, the fear of abandonment, the fear of disintegration—of “dissolving margins,” as Elena Ferrante puts it in her writing on motherhood—and, ultimately, the fear of death.

These are fears intrinsic to human life in general, but in *Mothers* Rose argues that they are acutely part of the process of becoming a mother. Pregnancy is nothing if not an act of colonization, and every birth, no matter how glorious or empowering, is a harbinger of death. This is true in a very concrete sense for mothers. Childbirth is risky, and mothers are still left to die in hospitals, in prisons, and on the streets. But it is also true in a less tangible but still powerful way for the people who encounter mothers and their children out in the world and, on some unconscious level, feel unnerved by the radical act of creating another human life. “The fact of being born can act as an uncanny reminder that once upon a time you were not here, and one day you will be no more,” Rose observes. (When I informed an administrator at the university where I work that I was pregnant with my second child, he replied in a funereal tone, “May you gestate in peace.”)

For Rose, these innermost fears are the reason that mothers are “invariably the object of either too much attention or not enough.” Mothers are denied promotions, pressured to leave their jobs, or fired at appalling rates. They are cordoned off from public life so that the visceral realities of motherhood—the disfigured bodies, the breasts leaking milk, the endless streams of piss and shit that emanate from babies, the slaps and shrieks of dissatisfied toddlers—do not intrude upon the serious work of serious men. They are judged, shamed, and abused for the decisions they make, no matter how personal or inconsequential those decisions are. (Formula or breast milk? Disposable or cloth? Work full-time, part-time, or not at all?) On the rare occasions when mothers become an object of attention in the political sphere, Rose notes, they often do so as parasites (welfare mothers scamming the state, alien mothers seeking asylum) or perfectionists (white, wealthy neoliberal mothers who pride themselves on “leaning in” and “having it all”). To be a mother is to shuttle between extremes—altruism and self-sufficiency, pride and abjection, love...
and hate—hounded by fear and self-doubt.

Among the many horrors of mothering under the patriarchy is that the image of the perfect mother—emotional, but not in excess; accomplished, but never to the detriment of her children’s well-being; stylish, but not too sexy—has made women into extremely effective agents of their own and each other’s oppression. Motherhood is “thick with idealisations,” Rose notes, many of which converge on a fantasy of maternal virtue predicated on total self-negation—the essence of cruelty. A mother must be everything for her child, which leaves very little room for her to be anything for herself.

A mother’s love is supposed to be unconditional, selfless, and pure, cleansed of the affects that pollute love between adults: boredom, jealousy, resentment, hatred. She is encouraged by pop culture and parenting guides to cleave to what Rose calls a “template of absolute singular devotion and blindness.” Her child is the most miraculous child in the world; there is nothing she would not do for him; he gives her life meaning—these are the lines she must utter with absolute clarity and conviction if she wants to play the role of the perfect mother; “the most wonderful person in the world,” as Wendy sang to the Lost Boys and my entranced toddler. Mothers bear the burdens of the world and the responsibility for setting things right.

Since the imaginary order of motherhood is essentially an elaborate fiction, Rose routes her argument about the perversions of maternal love through representations of abject or homicidal mothers in fiction. The archive she draws from is rich and varied, extending from the Greek tragedy of Medea to Edith Wharton’s The Mother’s Recompense, Roald Dahl’s Matilda, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, and Sindiwe Magona’s Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night. In each, we get stories featuring mothers whose incomprehensible treatment of their children reveals the corrupted ideals of motherhood: the possessiveness implicit in treating one’s child as a miracle; the resentment that can arise when one is expected to provide undiluted maternal affection and attention; the hardening of the heart when, despite her best efforts, a mother cannot protect her child from abuse, poverty, enslavement—when, as in Morrison’s Beloved, she “cannot secure the life of the child who is placed—sanctioniously, thoughtlessly, mostly without material or practical support—in her total care.” There is a wonderful, meandering chapter dedicated to the novels of Ferrante, in which Rose argues that the books speak “from the depths” of the maternal womb with an unparalleled intensity, fear, and violence. Pregnancy, in them, is the “original dissolution of form”—not just the literal stretching and tearing of bodies, but the strange and sudden porousness of subjectivity one experiences upon assuming responsibility for another’s life.

What is true for fictional mothers seems true for real ones as well. “What woman has not dreamed of ‘going over the edge’?” asks Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born—a book Rose returns to time and again in Mothers to stress the ordinariness of motherhood’s ugly impulses. Most mothers do not abandon or murder their children, but every single one has the potential to be impatient, exasperated, unkind. This does not make mothers who act on these feelings bad people. They are simply women subject to impossible, unrelenting demands; women who often receive little or no support or understanding from a society that believes it is in their nature to love and care, to be fruitful and multiply.

Reading these sections of Mothers, I recalled the many experiences I had forgotten (or repressed) just to perform the day-to-day work of mothering. The awesomeness of creation, followed by the terror of responsibility. The distress of feeding or swaddling or stimulating my children “the wrong way,” according to some arbitrary
book or website; the pride and pleasure and self-righteousness of doing it “right.” The rage I sometimes felt when I sat down at the end of the day, exhausted, and was forced to acknowledge that my life was no longer my own—a rage that was immediately checked by long bouts of self-recrimination, then sublimated into a series of perfectly posed photographs of my children, beautiful and happy and utterly oblivious to my distress. I was grateful to Rose for giving voice to these conflicted realities, for inviting her reader to acknowledge them without fear or shame. It struck me that she had positioned herself as a mother to mothers, ready to soothe all of us who felt like we were constantly failing.

One of the cruelest ironies of motherhood is that the harder it becomes to sustain the ideal of maternal perfection, the more women feel—and are made to feel—beholden to it. “As austerity and inequality increase across the globe,” and as “more and more children are falling into poverty,” Rose explains, the “focus on mothers is a sure-fire diversionary tactic, not least because it so effectively deflects from what might be far more disruptive forms of social critique.” For Rose, the failures of mothers become legible as the failures of society at large, placing motherhood at the heart of contemporary debates over immigration policy and ethno-nationalism, racism and police brutality, and the future of the welfare state in the United States and United Kingdom.

There is something oddly conspiratorial about Rose’s tone when she starts talking about politics. “Because mothers are seen as our point of entry into the world,” she insists, “there is nothing easier than to make social deterioration look like something which it is the sacred duty of mothers to prevent.” The exaggerated language of blame that Rose attributes to unreal actors—those shadowy entities using mothers as a “sure-fire diversionary tactic” from more “disruptive forms of social critique”—only further deflects from the larger question of why austerity has made mothering harder than before. It is because austerity policies have shifted nearly all the burdens of social reproduction from the state onto families, making them wholly responsible for feeding, clothing, educating, and caring for their children, that mothers are blamed for the persistence of problems that previously were not exclusively theirs to solve. Rose does, at times, acknowledge this. But her larger project fails to emphasize that this has nothing to do with the primal fears or fantasies of individuals. It is a social and historical failure—a dimension of caregiving that Rose’s analysis largely sidesteps, yielding some sweeping (and incorrect) claims about the politics of motherhood.

It is in the realm of politics that we find mothers whose vulnerability has provoked extraordinary vitriol. Take Rose’s example of mothers like Bimbo Ayelabola, the Nige-

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**from TRIPAS**

Conduzco y conduces  
—carpoolers & Catholics—  
conduction wires to Latin.

“Brought together”  
—heads bowed as if praying—  
these women make

strange communion—  
wafer after wafer,  
paper-thin shavings from

ingots of germanium.  
Solder-stitch to populate  
breadboard to motherboard

or read ohm resistors  
—by their bands of color—  
in circuit board syntax.

Solid state switches—  
a nascent ancient rotary  
& tin can to starlight.

—

Chicana Cherríe Moraga writing  
on her mother’s ‘piecework’  
for the nearby electronics plant

explains how her mother nightly sat before the TV ‘wrapping  
copper wires into the backs of

circuit boards.’ Braiding, I thought,  
to parse & plait those wires  
that would light the very images

she watched. I then looked up  
in Cosmo that knot-work.  
French, Dutch, Halo, Fishtail,

Milkmaid, Spiral, & Braid to Bun  
—those chongos my nana made  
over the years—the yank

& tugged-tie, the brush-work  
through the hair of sus hijas  
that sometimes produced a spark.

BRANDON SOM
rian migrant who gave birth to quintuplets at a cost of up to £200,000 to the National Health Service (according to the right-wing UK newspaper *The Sun*); or the absent mothers of Eritrea, Somalia, and Syria, whose children have been left to die in refugee camps after the British government has refused their applications for asylum. We also find mothers whose private suffering has spurred them to great acts of strength: the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, whose children disappeared during the country’s military dictatorship and who have never stopped looking for their children; Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner. It’s a heartbreaking list, and it raises one of the cruelest and most politically crucial questions of all: What are the added burdens of a mother whose sons and daughters, because of their race, their class, their ethnicity, their country of origin, have a greater chance of becoming the victims of state violence? One could fill a book with answers to this question alone, with the stories of migrant mothers forced to leave their children in war zones; the Mothers of the Movement, a coalition of black women whose children have been killed by the police; MomsRising, a group of mothers who draw attention to children who have been swept up in ICE raids. However, even as Rose moves from the personal to the political, her focal point remains what she believes lies beneath the shifting political tides: a primal fear of mothers as standing outside of or against the personal to the political, her focal point remains what she believes lies beneath the shifting political tides: a primal fear of everything that is wrong with the world.” “It is perhaps unfair to expect Mothers to provide a blueprint for the future, but then again, what else is a mother but a kind of soothsayer—someone whose sense of time is always forward-facing? “We expect her to look to the future (what else is she meant to do?),” Rose writes. The future is often more painful to contemplate than our present failings, both for the individual and for the world. For Rose, the ideal future is marked by peace and quiet: being “left to get on quietly with [the] work of making the experience of motherhood more than worth it.” I suspect all mothers yearn for that peace and quiet, but I doubt that appreciation or empathy alone will get us there. We cannot quiet the voices of self-conscious about drawing on “private psychical realities”—primal fantasies, fears, internalized cultural ideologies—to inform theory or justify political choices. It was not enough to know that a woman’s feelings or her behavior was the product of her oppression. Absent any theory of collective activity, knowledge alone could only produce a feeling of impotent moral outrage or, even worse, a narcissistic self-pity.

This is the danger posed by any psychoanalytic approach to politics. It is particularly frustrating, though, in the case of Mothers, where Rose’s solution to the overtly political problems faced by mothers begins and ends with self-perception. In her discussion of Estela Welldon’s *Mother, Madonna, Whore*, Rose criticizes Welldon for her toothless politics of empathy. Welldon’s book, she writes, “makes a plea for tolerance and understanding, although those terms are perhaps a bit soggy liberal when what is involved is more like dropping the scales from our eyes.” Yet, several lines later, she suggests that what “social policy and psychological understanding need” is “to give motherhood its deserved but mostly refused place ‘at the center of human difficulty.’” This is a nice thought, but it’s difficult to know what it would mean for either social policy or psychological understanding; difficult, too, to see how it’s not also participating in the “soggy liberal” tradition of leaning on psychological understanding to respond to systemic problems.

It is perhaps unfair to expect Mothers to provide a blueprint for the future, but then again, what else is a mother but a kind of soothsayer—someone whose sense of time is always forward-facing? “We expect her to look to the future (what else is she meant to do?),” Rose writes. The future is often more painful to contemplate than our present failings, both for the individual and for the world. For Rose, the ideal future is marked by peace and quiet: being “left to get on quietly with [the] work of making the experience of motherhood more than worth it.” I suspect all mothers yearn for that peace and quiet, but I doubt that appreciation or empathy alone will get us there. We cannot quiet the voices of judgment or shame without casting off the disproportionate and crippling burden of care that is placed on mothers, and we cannot cast off that burden until we are willing to confront what a mother is: not the disembodied “angel voice that bids you good night,” as Wendy sings, but a physical and emotional laborer, underserved, underpaid, and always on the clock.
Puzzle No. 3466

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

8, 14A and 26 See 12 (2,8,2,8,4,7,4,4,2-4)

10 Pro-Democratic pyromaniac, initially enthusiastic about something that might burst into flames (4,5)

11 Understand flipping bird, for example (3,2)

12 Tehran lunatic forms an organization whose slogan is spoofed at 8, 14A, and 26 (3,3)

13 Security measure’s collapse involving faulty wire (8)

14 See 8

18 California uranium implicated in crude injury or death (8)

20 What a foreigner might have: a cold penny (6)

24 Sea smashed canoe (5)

25 Rearrange white rose, or else! (9)

26 See 8

DOWN

1 East Coast university admits one San Francisco eccentric (6)

2 Come out in mid-November with a bit of work? Excellent (6)

3 Piano note cut to get ready (8)

4 Oy—mining disaster brings disgrace (8)

5 Amusing lecture includes a hit (6)

6 Running backward through hospital lab, too, for sport (8)

7 Local regulation requiring piece of turnip and tea concoction in salad (5,3)

9 Some Europeans, lacking leadership or places to stay (4)

14 Game consisting of adding an E under an entry in an ancient Roman puzzle? (8)

15 Horticulturist, finally putting on sagacious demeanor, raised a flower (8)

16 Anoint Al, degenerate citizen (8)

17 Jockey acing run without a concern (8)

19 History article: “Down and Up, Large and Small” (6)

21 The Spanish exalted a pious Muslim prophet (6)

22 Minute, like adolescents? (6)

23 Turn is nearly complete, and I’m having a great time (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3465

ACROSS
CATER + PILLAR 7 rev. hidden
8 pun. 10 Y + ALLOW 11 CRULLERS
12 LOU IS JAN + A 14 B + PUN
17 W + ATT 18 ang. 20 MAN + EUVER
(19) DINNER + O 24 NOCTURNAL
25 FILAMBE 26 OR SO + NW(ELL)ES

1 CATERPILLAR

2 defs.

3 TRA (rev.) + [p]OISE[d]

4 a

5 [a]GER anag. (blit.) 4 IN + [EBRIAN]T

6 7 “loan, Lee” R + HONE

7 LIT + TLH (rev.) + OMEN

9 MISANTH (anag.) + ROPE

13 A(GAME)M + NON

15 P(LACE)MATS

19 AUGU(ES)s 19 NAC + HO (rev)

23 “clay”

DOWN

1 2 defis. 2 TORI (rev.) + [p]OISE[d]

3 def[eg]er anag. (blit.) 4 IN + [EBRIAN]T

5 “loan, Lee” R + HONE

7 LIT + TLH (rev.) + OMEN

9 MISANTH (anag.) + ROPE

13 A(GAME)M + NON

15 P(LACE)MATS

19 AUGU(ES)s + 19 NAC + HO (rev)

23 “clay”
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