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EXPOSING THE PENTAGON’S MASSIVE ACCOUNTING FRAUD

Spending keeps rising while the Defense Department cooks the books.

Dave Lindorff
Letters

The War on War

In his review of Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro’s *The International-ists* [“The War Against War,” Dec. 3/10], Stephen Wertheim perpetuates the erroneous notion that the Pact of Paris sought to “outlaw” war. As Wertheim writes, the pact “outlawed ‘war,’ full stop.” In fact, it did no such thing. The word “outlawed” or “outlawry” does not appear in its two substantive articles. Instead, the pact calls for the signatories to “renounce it [war] as an instrument of national policy.” Although outlawing war and renouncing its use might seem to come to the same thing, the distinction is critical. It split the US peace movement in the 1920s, with passionate believers on both sides. Nicholas Murray Butler, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was this country’s strongest advocate for the renunciationists. Outlawing war, he said, would be as futile as passing a resolution outlawing hypocrisy. In addition to being useless, it inevitably had to be tied to some scheme for punishing transgressors. Renunciation, on the other hand, was a voluntary act with significant moral consequences.

Although Frank B. Kellogg and Aristide Briand, the pact’s architects, weren’t necessarily convinced by Butler’s arguments (Kellogg and Butler in fact detested each other), they did finally settle on calling for the “High Contracting Parties” to sign on to renounce the use of war. No effort was made to outlaw it or declare it illegal.

Michael Rosenthal

New York City

Stephen Wertheim Replies

I thank Michael Rosenthal for recovering the distinction between the renunciation and the outlawry of war. That figures like Butler insisted on stopping at the former, in part because the latter might imply a need to punish transgressors, seems to strengthen my point that the Pact of Paris was born of contradictory visions: one pacifist and the other sanctionist, with a continuum in between.

Nevertheless, to many of its supporters at the time, the pact undermined the legality of war (except in “self-defense,” a notably capacious category) and constituted the high-water mark of the “outlawry” movement. And despite what Butler intended, its ultimate—in inevitable?—significance was to supply a rationale for war against war.

Stephen Wertheim

New York City

The US as It Should Be

“What would it mean to be a leftist in foreign policy?” David Klion asks in his review of *The World as It Is*, the new memoir by former Obama adviser Ben Rhodes [“The Blob,” Nov. 12]. To begin with, it would mean insisting that our government renounce the use of force outside our borders unless authorized by the United Nations Security Council. This is already every nation’s obligation, so we would simply be demanding that our government obey the law.

Next, we should insist that our government renounce the first use of nuclear weapons and also, as we’ve already pledged to do in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, make every effort to move toward their complete abolition.

Finally, the United States should promote democracy internationally. The best way to do this would be to flood the world with copies of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* and other books by Gene Sharp. Nonviolent direct action is the most effective vehicle of social change and democratic self-organization.

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DECEMBER 3/10, 2018

How a feminist foreign policy can save the world

BEATRICE FIHN

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Happy Birthday, Noam!

Noam Chomsky was aptly described in a *New York Times* book review published almost four decades ago as “arguably the most important intellectual alive today.” He was 50 then. Now he is 90, and on the occasion of his December 7 birthday, the German international broadcasting service Deutsche Welle observed, again aptly, that Chomsky is “arguably the foremost political dissident of the last half a century.”

In his life and work, Chomsky reminds us that intellect and dissent go hand in hand, and that the vital challenge of our times is to maintain “an independent mind.” That’s not easy in an age of manufactured consent, but it is possible, as Chomsky proves so well—by continuing to speak, as consistently and agilely as ever, about the lies of our times.

When I visited him this fall, he was characteristically gracious, witty, and blunt. He pulled no punches, decrying the failures of capitalism and its governments, sparing few politicians and no parties. The academic and activist, whose outspoken opposition to US imperialism earned him a place on Richard Nixon’s “enemies list,” replied to a question in 2017 (from *Democracy Now!’s* Amy Goodman) about the Republican Party under Donald Trump and Paul Ryan with a question concerning the party line on climate change: “Has there ever been an organization in human history that is dedicated, with such commitment, to the destruction of organized human life on Earth?” His answer: “Not that I’m aware of.”

Much has been said about Chomsky’s contributions to our intellectual and political life. But what he continues to say matters most. He is still stirring things to our intellectual and political life. But what? He says that in England, a free country—I’m virtually quoting—unpopular ideas can be suppressed without the use of force. And he goes on to give some examples and, really, just a couple of common-sense explanations, which are to the point. One reason, he says, is: The press is owned by wealthy men who have every reason not to want certain ideas to be expressed. And the other, he says, essentially, is: It’s a ‘good’ education.”

That might strike some people as counterintuitive, but as Chomsky explained: “If you have a ‘good’ education, you’ve gone to the best schools, [and] you have internalized the understanding that there’s certain things it just wouldn’t do to say—and, I think we can add to that, it wouldn’t do to think. And that’s a powerful mechanism. So there are things you just don’t think and you don’t say. That’s the result of effective education, effective indoctrination. If people—many people—don’t succumb to it, what happens to them?”

“Well, I’ll tell you a story,” he continued. “I was in Sweden a couple years ago, and I noticed that taxi drivers were being very friendly—much more than I expected. And finally I asked one of them, ‘Why’s everyone being so nice?’ He pulled out a T-shirt he said every taxi driver has, and the T-shirt had a picture of me and a quote in Swedish of something I’d said once when I was asked, ‘What happens to people of independent mind?’ And I said, ‘They become taxi drivers.’”

Or Noam Chomsky.

JOHN NICHOLS

VOLUME 308, NUMBER 1, January 7, 2019
The digital version of this issue is available to all subscribers December 13 at TheNation.com.
Cover illustration by Victor Juhasz.
The Yellow Vest Revolt

The French uprising was never just about a fuel tax.

French President Emmanuel Macron isn’t a fan of protests. He has mocked union demonstrators in the past for being “lazy” and “cynical” and criticized his predecessors in the Élysée Palace for too easily succumbing to the demands of their critics. His presidency, Macron promised, would stick to its business-friendly reform agenda—even when unpopular. As the former investment banker put it bluntly last fall, “democracy is not in the street.”

This is what makes Macron’s decision to cancel an increase in the fuel tax all the more extraordinary. After weeks of protests that have grown violent—with at least four deaths so far and more than 3,000 arrests—Macron has finally conceded to the central demand of the so-called gilets jaunes, or Yellow Vests. He has also proposed a modest state-funded pay hike for minimum-wage workers and a reduction in the social charges paid by pensioners. Those hoping for the protests to fade away, however, could be in for a disappointment. The government’s concessions don’t address deeper problems at the heart of the grassroots uprising—which, in the end, was never just about the fuel tax.

Outside of the major cities, most people in France drive cars. It’s a necessity that consumes a major chunk of their income—in general, much more so than in the United States, where gross pay is higher and state governments maintain astonishingly low tax rates on gasoline. In France, the monthly median income is €1,700, according to the state statistical agency, or about $1,900. Meanwhile, diesel fuel, which most drivers use, costs more than €1.50 a liter—equivalent to $6.47 a gallon. Diesel prices have spiked by about 25 percent over the past year.

Frustrations with fuel prices began building last summer. But they reached a new level in September, when the government announced that it would hike taxes at the pump by as much as 25 cents a gallon in 2019. The next month, truck driver Eric Drouet created a vaguely worded Facebook page calling for a “national movement against tax increases” to start on November 17.

In the end, more than 282,000 people responded to Drouet’s call. While the number of weekly demonstrators has actually declined since then, the Yellow Vests have nevertheless managed to seize the national spotlight, instilling a deep sense of fear in the political establishment. That’s partly due to the violence, embodied by the internationally circulated images of cars burning in central Paris. Still, an even greater factor is the movement’s seemingly spontaneous origin story: a haphazard discussion on social media that took off without the support of political parties or unions. While Marine Le Pen on the far right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the left have both endorsed the Yellow Vest movement and clearly hope to capitalize on its success, their respective parties have played a minimal role in planning the hundreds of nationwide protests.

Further contributing to the cloud of dread now enveloping the Élysée is the fact that the gilets jaunes have broad public approval. Not a single leading party in France enjoys close to majority support, according to opinion polls. And yet the polls show that 60–70 percent have backed the Yellow Vests, with working-class respondents expressing the most sympathy.

The movement has managed to win such wide support because it clearly has tapped into a deeper sense of social injustice. While that sentiment is shared nationwide to varying degrees, the protests themselves sprang up largely in rural areas and in le périurbain: the sparsely populated outer bands of the suburbs and metropolitan areas. These are parts of the country that suffer from high jobless rates and rely heavily on state investment to keep their communities afloat, from unemployment benefits to the public rail network that connects them to larger cities.

High expectations for the state also come with close scrutiny over its actions. This can be misinterpreted as hostility toward the very idea of state intervention in the economy. But the fact remains that most gilets jaunes supporters are not opposed to the state’s role in the economy; they simply want it to act more fairly. Over the past decade, they’ve witnessed hospital closures, postal-service cuts, and rail reforms that have laid the groundwork for privatization and higher ticket prices. Much like spiraling fuel costs, these are not the sorts of things that keep wealthy people up at night.

Meanwhile, since taking office a year and a half ago, Macron has mandated further belt-tightening for the working class in the name of fighting the budget deficit. Local governments have seen subsidies for part-time jobs slashed, and low-income people have suffered cuts to their housing aid. Yet the rich receive a very different sort of treatment: Overseeing his first budget as president, Macron rushed to slash France’s wealth tax, which covers those with over €1.3 million in assets, so that it applies only to real-estate taxes. This is why the notion of justice fiscale, or “tax justice,” figures so prominently among Yellow Vest sympathizers: Why should ordinary people be forced to fork over another couple hundred euros each month while the super-rich are rewarded simply for being super rich?

At the same time, a non-negligible share of the gilets jaunes’ appeal flows precisely from their lack of clarity. One prominent list of demands is fraught with inconsistency: It calls on the government to both cut payroll taxes for employers and increase the minimum wage; it demands that immigrants better “integrate” into French society, but also that the government improve its treatment of asylum seekers. Other demands take aim at political institutions: abolishing the Senate, which is not directly elected by voters, and authorizing national referendums on questions that earn above a certain number of signatures.

With the government acceding to the protesters’ clearest demand—and throwing in some additional concessions—the movement’s next phase is shrouded in doubt.

(continued on page 8)
Q&A

SHIREEN AL-ADEIMI

A military coalition led by Saudi Arabia—with training, weapons, and technical support from the United States—has been waging a brutal war against Yemen. So far, more than 100,000 children have died of starvation, malnutrition, and disease as a result.

Since the Saudi strikes began in 2015, Shireen Al-Adeimi, a professor of education at Michigan State University, has been at the forefront of anti-intervention efforts. For her, this activism is personal; she grew up in Yemen, and her extended family remains scattered across the country. Al-Adeimi has launched petitions, written op-eds, given talks, and updated her growing Twitter following on the efforts to end US support for the war. I caught up with her recently to ask about the urgency of the situation.

—Chris Gelardi

CG: Can you explain a bit about the origins of the conflict?

SA: It can be traced back to 2011, when the Arab Spring protests were happening. Yemen had its own Arab Spring, and there was a lot of hope that maybe we could usher in a new government and a truly democratic process in Yemen. But Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president at the time, refused to step down.

When he did resign, he transferred power to his vice president, Abdrabboh Mansour Hadi, who was supposed to have a two-year term. It expired, so the parliament granted him one more year. That term expired, and by then there was a lot of frustration with his ability to move things forward.

One of the groups that ended up staging a coup at the end of 2014 was the Houthis, a small rebel group in the north. Within months of that, Hadi resigned, and then Saudi Arabia began bombing.

CG: Why did the Saudis decide to intervene?

SA: The Saudis have always intervened in the affairs of Yemen, which has a strategic location; it controls the Bab el-Mandeb strait, where about 4.8 million barrels of oil travel a day—largely Saudi oil. So Saudi Arabia has an interest in maintaining control over Yemen.

King Salman took power in Saudi Arabia in January 2015. He appointed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as deputy crown prince—he’s since become crown prince—and as defense minister. Within two months of his appointment, he was bombing Yemen.

Many see Salman’s attack on Yemen as a résumé war: Here’s who I am, here’s what I can do. Nobody really knew who he was before. It was impulsive, and as you can see with the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, this man doesn’t really think through the things he does.

CG: How urgent is the humanitarian situation, and what are the prospects for, if not peace, at least some relief?

SA: There is no crisis right now that is more horrific than what is going on in Yemen. Half the population is facing famine. Half. Fourteen million people. They will starve to death if the Saudi blockade isn’t lifted, if aid isn’t allowed to come into the country, if trade isn’t resumed.

We have people dying of diseases like cholera, which really should not be happening in the modern world. But they don’t have access to clean water, and so we’re seeing the worst outbreak in modern history. It’s catastrophic, and it is definitely going to get much worse if we don’t do something about it. And “doing something” is really to stop what we’re doing—for the US to stop supporting the Saudis and perpetuating this war.

CG: What misconceptions about the war in Yemen are most commonly held by Americans, and how might advocates counter them?

SA: For the longest time—up until this summer, really—when Yemen was mentioned, the role of the US was really not highlighted. The US is not an observer; they are incredibly involved. It’s up to journalists to challenge the role of the US more aggressively, so that people here can know that they can do something to stop it.

CG: What comes next? And what can readers do to help?

SA: What comes next, for us in the US, is to get our senators and our representatives to stop the world’s worst humanitarian crisis—to stop supporting these war crimes that are occurring every single day in Yemen in our name.
Laila Lalami

Trump’s Dirty Laundry

In public, he hates immigrants. In private, he depends on them.

Last week, when I read the story about Donald Trump’s undocumented housekeeper, I was filled with rage and sadness. Rage because it was yet another example of the president doing something he’d campaigned against; sadness because many politicians demonize immigrants to win votes, while relying on their labor for profit.

During her five years as a housekeeper, Victorina Morales washed the president’s clothes, ironed his underwear, and cleaned his villa at the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey. She was even awarded a certificate from the White House Communications Agency in recognition of her performance. But throughout this entire time, she lacked the official papers necessary for her employment.

In an interview, Morales told The New York Times that a supervisor had helped her procure fake documents. She said she knew the risks of going public with this, but was moved to speak out because of the derogatory remarks that Trump regularly makes about immigrants, which—combined with comments from one of her managers—made her work life unendurable. “We are tired of the abuse, the insults, the way he talks about us when he knows that we are here helping him make money,” she said.

It might seem surprising that someone in a position as vulnerable as Morales’s would dare to tell the truth about the most powerful man in the world. After all, it’s not just a job or deportation that this brave woman is risking: In her native Guatemala, her attorney told The Washington Post, her family received threats, and her father-in-law was hacked to death. When you have little money and few prospects, though, the one thing you can always hold on to is your dignity—and Morales had clearly reached her breaking point.

Trump is by no means unique in publicly vilifying undocumented immigrants while privately profiting from their work. The family of Republican Congressman Devin Nunes, who represents California’s San Joaquin Valley, quietly moved their dairy farm to Sibley, Iowa, where it reportedly employs undocumented workers. Both Nunes and the congressman who represents Sibley—that would be the openly racist Steve King—have supported Trump’s draconian immigration policies. A year before that, Andrew Puzder, a fast-food executive whose nomination as Trump’s secretary of labor was being scrutinized for labor violations, found himself under criticism for employing an undocumented housekeeper. Puzder claimed that he was unaware she was undocumented, and said he’d paid back taxes for that worker to the IRS—after he was nominated.

Nor is the hypocrisy on immigration restricted to Republicans. Remember Nannygate? In 1993, two of Bill Clinton’s nominees for US attorney general, Zoë Baird and Kimba Wood, had to withdraw because they had employed undocumented domestic workers. The story of Donald Trump and Victorina Morales, then, is emblematic of a much larger dynamic in the United States: We have a system that uses cheap, undocumented labor to deliver goods or services to consumers and vast profit to employers.

No American today can claim to be unaffected by undocumented immigration. The meatpacking industry relies on such workers, as does the service industry. Nearly half of the field workers on US farms are undocumented—and that’s a low estimate. Fifteen percent of construction workers are unauthorized. If you’ve ever eaten a hamburger, snacked on almonds, or stayed at a hotel, chances are you’ve used undocumented labor.

Unauthorized workers are frequently portrayed as freeloaders who come here to “steal” jobs. But many immigrants do pay taxes on their income. The IRS issues individual-taxpayer identification numbers to people who don’t have Social Security numbers, enabling them to file returns. In that respect, Victorina Morales has done something that her employer, the president of the United States, didn’t do: She paid her taxes.

Nevertheless, Trump has looked for new ways to punish and abuse undocumented immigrants: separating babies and children from their parents at the border, diverting money from scientific research to fund detention camps, and sending thousands of troops to the southern border to stop a “migrant caravan” that was hundreds of miles away.

In a transparent effort to scare voters ahead of the midterm elections, he also released a Willie Horton-style ad about an undocumented immigrant named Luis Bracamontes. That strategy doesn’t seem to have worked: The Republicans suffered losses in Congress in November. Still, white voters’ views on immigration have been shown to be a strong predictor of their electoral choices, so Trump will probably deploy more of his hateful rhetoric ahead of the 2020 elections.

Since Morales’s revelations, two more undocumented workers at Trump’s club have spoken out, confirming that management knew about their status when they were hired. In each case, the women have been attacked as unreliable narrators of their own stories. In a statement to the press, the Trump Organization said that it had “tens of thousands of employees across our properties and... very strict hiring practices. If an employee submitted false documentation in an attempt to circumvent the law, they will be terminated immediately.”

In a few days or weeks, Victorina Morales’s story will disappear from the headlines, but the legal and moral issues that contributed to it will not. Undocumented immigrants help the elite make money, only to be used and abused by that same elite to win elections. We must do better. We must demand comprehensive immigration reform that provides a path to legalization, punishes labor abuses, and protects undocumented workers.
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While the *gilets jaunes* enjoy momentum and show a willingness to keep protesting, it’s not exactly clear what else they seek.

In this vacuum, the more traditional pillars of the French left have sensed an opportunity. With the backing of student unions, middle- and high-school students have led walkouts to protest the country’s new higher-education admissions procedures. Some of their university counterparts have done the same, criticizing a hike in tuition fees charged to students from outside the European Union. A prominent anti-racist group, meanwhile, is backing the Yellow Vests while calling for justice in the *banlieues*, the urbanized suburbs inhabited by many immigrants and French citizens of Arab and African descent.

Clearly caught off guard by the movement’s initial appeal, left-wing trade unions are seeking to turn out their members and sympathizers, too. While it hasn’t fully endorsed the Yellow Vests, the heavyweight General Confederation of Labor finally called for a nationwide “day of action” on December 14. The move is part of an attempt to turn France’s unexpected wave of contestation in a more progressive direction, to shift the conversation from tax relief to hikes in direct compensation.

There is a kind of magical formula often invoked in French activist circles: the necessity for a *convergence des luttes*, or “convergence of struggles.” To people who don’t spend much time thinking about politics, the term can come across as hackneyed and utopian—the mark of a seasoned trade unionist out of sync with the general public. Yet with the former now taking the latter’s lead, the idea actually doesn’t sound so far-fetched today.

COLE STANGLER

Cole Stangler, a former staff writer for the International Business Times and In These Times, is based in Paris.
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A Matter of Facts

Representative-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) sent a Nation investigation viral on December 2 when she commented on a tweet about Dave Lindorff’s feature on the Pentagon’s failed audit. The original tweet, by journalist Jordan Uhl, included two screenshots from Lindorff’s piece, which starts on page 12 of this issue but was first published online on November 27. Ocasio-Cortez, seeing the $21 trillion figure highlighted in Uhl’s screenshot, added her own wry observation: “66% of Medicare for All [at an estimated cost of $32 trillion] could have been funded already by the Pentagon.”

But Ocasio-Cortez was wrong. The $21 trillion refers to the Pentagon’s undocumented transactions, which include both inflows and outlays. Prominent news outlets jumped on her error, even though Ocasio-Cortez clarified in a follow-up tweet: “This is to say that we only demand fiscal details w/ health+edu, rarely elsewhere.” Salvador Rizzo of The Washington Post’s “Fact Checker” blog awarded her four Pinocchios—the same falsehood rating that the paper gave President Trump for his claim that the death toll from Hurricane Maria had been inflated, as Reed Richardson of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting wrote. FAIR noted that Ocasio-Cortez reacted to an accurate figure but misunderstood its context. It’s true that everyone—new congresspersons included—should start reading more carefully before they tweet. But Rizzo’s harsh Pinocchio verdict reads more like a grasp for “both sides” objectivity than a measured reality check.

Maia Hibbett

The Great Unravelings

How should the left respond to Trump and Brexit?

When I first came to live in the United States from the UK, the most common question, particularly from African Americans, was: “Where was it best to be black?” I would usually qualify my response by making it clear that it’s not morally possible to weigh up whose racism is better before using my autobiography as a vehicle to try and answer the question.

As the youngest of three boys raised by a single mother with a chronic health condition, I’d tell them, my odds were better as a child in Britain. We had a national health-care system, financial support to stay in high school, and free education all the way through university (which is not the case today). We made it to adulthood without any of us ending up in the criminal-justice system or dead. But once we had made it through school—and most were not as lucky as we were—Britain did not know what to do with us. You bumped your head on the ceiling pretty fast, and it felt more like concrete than glass. For several years in our adulthood, my brothers and I lived abroad—two in America, one in Ireland—and it is telling how many successful black Britons leave: director Steve McQueen, actress Marianne Jean-Baptiste, artist Chris Ofili, just to name a few. (Meghan Markle swam across the Atlantic against the tide). Many, though by no means all, leave for America. And a significant number, like me and one of my brothers, come back.

Having returned to the United Kingdom in 2015 after 12 years in the US, I’ve heard a different question, particularly from liberals: “Which is worse, Trump or Brexit?” I have had to similarly qualify my response by first making it clear that nothing good will come from either of them.

There are, however, some important distinctions. The United States will have the chance to get rid of Trump in two more years; Brexit is for good. There were legitimate reasons why some progressive people voted for Brexit—the European Union is a profoundly undemocratic institution—but no fathomable reason why any progressive would ever vote for Trump. The Brexit referendum allowed for one question with unknown implications; the US presidency is a known entity. People voting on Brexit were generally expressing a view about issues related to the nation-state: identity, immigration, sovereignty, patriotism, nostalgia. Trump was about everything from misogyny and xenophobia to foreign policy and abortion. Brexit has been a gratuitous act of self-harm in which Britain is overwhelmingly the primary victim. Conversely, while the Trump agenda will inflict serious damage on America, it is likely to affect other, weaker nations even more.

Both are bad and are making things worse, but each is different. Also, the question of which will prove the bigger disaster has yet to be decided, because we are still dealing with them. At this crucial juncture, with both projects appearing to unravel, the answer will be shaped to a significant degree by what we on the left can make of what comes next.

“In the endgame,” said chess great José Raúl Capablanca, “don’t think in terms of moves but in terms of plans.” Both Robert Mueller’s investigation and the Brexit negotiations appear to be moving into their endgame. Mueller’s noose tightens ever further around the Trump administration, with few higher-ups left to indict who don’t bear the Trump name or haven’t married into the family. Meanwhile, at the time of this writing, UK Prime Minister Theresa May has just postponed a parliamentary vote on Brexit that she was certain to lose by a humiliating margin—but with just four months left before the self-imposed deadline for our election from the EU, time is running out. It’s not entirely clear what this means for Trump or for May—though it is unlikely to be good.

The left has approached this double unraveling in terms of moves. What comes next: impeachment, general elections, prison, resignations, defections, second referendum, and so on? It would be more constructive, and more beneficial, to think in terms of plans.

The one thing we cannot do is go backward. If a second referendum on Brexit saw the coun-
try deciding to remain in the EU—a big if—it would no more take us back to June 22, 2016, the day before the first referendum took place, than Trump’s impeachment would take us back to November 7. Neither would deal with the bigotry, nationalism, stagnant wages, political alienation, cynicism, and desperation that made them both possible.

If Trump was involved in a serious crime and this becomes grounds for his impeachment, then so be it. But to rely on a strictly legal response to remove him from the presidency misses the point. Similarly, a new referendum in which Britain narrowly decides to remain in the EU rather than narrowly deciding to leave doesn’t solve the fundamental question; it just slightly—if decisively—changes the answer. Both Trump and Brexit are products of a political and economic crisis. The left needs a coherent response to that crisis. Indeed, it was partly the lack of a meaningful response from the center-left that made both possible.

In both cases, the desire should be to reverse the effects of the neoliberal excesses that have led to inequality, marginalization, and insecurity—not to press “pause” on them.

The pertinent question is therefore not “Which is worse, Trump or Brexit?” but “Which left response to the conditions that produced them has the greatest chance of success?” We don’t know the answer to that yet either; though with Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party and the left insurgency among Democrats, both of which preceded Trump and Brexit, we are inching toward one. But at least that question shifts the focus to a cogent view of the future rather than a melancholic assessment of the past.

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**SNAPSHOT / TRACIE WILLIAMS**

**Border Limbo**

Thousands of migrants are currently in Tijuana, Mexico, as they wait for an opportunity to apply for asylum in the United States. Photographer Tracie Williams recently traveled to the city to get their stories. View the full photo essay at TheNation.com/caravan.

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**Calvin Trillin | Deadline Poet**

**KELLY TO LEAVE WHITE HOUSE**

Brought in to end the White House mess,
He had a measure of success:
The ship of state has not been righted,
But he himself was not indicted.
SPECIAL REPORT

EXPOSING THE PENTAGON’S MASSIVE ACCOUNTING FRAUD

Spending keeps rising while the Defense Department cooks the books.

DAVE LINDORFF
ON NOVEMBER 15, ERFNST & YOUNG AND THE OTHER PRIVATE FIRMS HIRED TO AUDIT THE PENTAGON announced that they couldn’t complete the job. Congress had ordered an independent audit of the Department of Defense, the government’s largest discretionary-cost center—which receives 54 cents out of every dollar in federal appropriations—because the Pentagon had failed for decades to audit itself. The firms concluded, however, that the DOD’s financial records were so riddled with bookkeeping deficiencies, irregularities, and errors that a reliable audit was simply impossible.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan tried to put the best face on things, telling reporters, “We failed the audit, but we never expected to pass it.” Shanahan suggested that the department should get credit for the effort, saying, “It was an audit on a $2.7 trillion organization, so the fact that we did the audit is substantial.” The truth, however, is that the DOD was dragged kicking and screaming to this audit by bipartisan frustration in Congress—and had this been a major corporation, the result likely would have been a crashed stock.

As Republican Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, a frequent critic of the Defense Department’s financial practices, said on the Senate floor in September 2017, the long-standing failure to conduct a proper audit reflects “26 years of hard-core foot-dragging” on the part of the DOD, where “internal resistance to auditing the books runs deep.” In 1990, Congress passed the Chief Financial Officers Act, which required all departments and agencies of the federal government to develop auditable accounting systems and to submit to audits annually. Since then, every department and agency has come into compliance—except the Pentagon.

Now, an investigation by The Nation has uncovered an explanation for this foot-dragging: For decades, the DOD’s leaders and accountants have been perpetrating a gigantic, unconstitutional accounting fraud, deliberately cooking the books to mislead Congress and drive the department’s budgets even higher, regardless of military necessity. The Defense Department has literally been making up numbers in its annual financial reports to Congress—representing trillions of dollars’ worth of seemingly nonexistent transactions—knowing that Congress would rely on those misleading reports when deciding how much money to give it the following year, according to government records and interviews with current and former Defense Department officials, congressional sources, and independent experts.

“If the DOD were being honest, they would go to Congress and say, ‘All these proposed budgets we’ve been presenting to you are a bunch of garbage,’” says Jack Armstrong, who spent more than five years in the department’s Office of the Inspector General as a supervisory director of audits before retiring in 2011.

As a result of the Pentagon’s accounting shenanigans, some $21 trillion—yes, trillion—worth of financial transactions cannot be accounted for. That number caught the eye of Representative-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez after this article originally appeared on TheNation.com. On December 2, she tweeted to her 1.47 million followers that the missing $21 trillion could have been used to help fund a Medicare for All program. However, that isn’t really the case: As this exposé made clear (and as articles in The Washington Post and Vox soon reiter-ated), there is no $21 trillion pot of money hidden inside the Pentagon. What there has been instead is a systematic, long-standing, unconstitutional effort by the Department of Defense to feed Congress phony numbers and thereby inflate the DOD’s budget by billions of dollars each year. How many billions? No one knows for sure, though informed estimates put it as high as $100 billion—not enough to fund Medicare for All, but a good down payment on the Green New Deal that Ocasio-Cortez is championing to fight climate change.

The Pentagon’s accounting scam works like this: When the DOD submits its annual budget requests to Congress, it sends along the prior year’s financial reports, which contain fabricated numbers. These numbers disguise the fact that the DOD doesn’t always spend all of the money that Congress allocates in a given year. However, instead of returning such unspent funds to the US Treasury, as the law requires, the Pentagon sometimes launders and shifts this money to other parts of its budget.

Veteran Pentagon staffers say that this practice violates Article I, Section 9, of the US Constitution, which states: “No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law; and a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time.”

Among the laundering tactics that the Pentagon uses is moving “one-year money”—funds that Congress intends to be spent in a single year—into a pool of five-year money, because unspent money in this pool doesn’t have to be returned during the five-year allocation period.
The Nation submitted detailed

The Nation.

Submitted by "plugs," as in plugging a hole, said current and former officials.

“Nippering,” a reference to a sharp-nosed tool used to snip off bits of wire or metal, is Pentagon slang for shifting money from its congressionally authorized purpose to a different one. Such nippering can be repeated multiple times “until the funds become virtually untraceable,” says one Pentagon budgeting veteran, who insisted on anonymity in order to keep his job as a defense lobbyist.

The plugs can be staggering in size. In fiscal year 2015, for example, Congress appropriated $122 billion for the US Army. Yet Defense Department records for the Army's 2015 budget included a whopping $6.5 trillion in plugs. Most of these plugs “lack[ed] supporting documentation,” in the bland phrasing of the department’s internal watchdog, the Office of the Inspector General. In other words, there were no ledger entries or receipts to back up how that $6.5 trillion was supposedly spent. Indeed, more than 16,000 records that might reveal either the source or the destination of some of that $6.5 trillion had been “removed,” the inspector general’s office reported.

In this way, the Defense Department propels US military spending higher year after year, even when the country isn’t fighting any major wars, says Franklin “Chuck” Spinney, a former Pentagon whistle-blower. Spinney’s revelations to Congress and the news media about wildly inflated Pentagon spending helped spark public outrage in the 1980s. “They’re making up the numbers and then just asking for more money each year,” Spinney tells The Nation. The funds that the Pentagon has been amassing over the years through its bogus bookkeeping maneuvers “could easily be as much as $100 billion,” he estimates.

Indeed, Congress appropriated a record amount—$716 billion—for the Department of Defense in fiscal year 2019. That was up $24 billion from FY 2018’s $692 billion, which itself was up $6 billion from FY 2017’s $686 billion. Such largesse is what drives US military spending higher than that of the next 10 highest-spending countries combined, Spinney adds. Meanwhile, the closest thing to a full-scale war the United States is currently fighting is in Afghanistan, where approximately 15,000 US troops are deployed—only 2.8 percent as many as were in Vietnam at the height of that war.

The Pentagon’s accounting practices appear to be an intentional effort to avoid accountability, Armstrong says. “A lot of the plugs—not all, but a substantial portion—are used to force general-ledger receipts to agree with the general budget reports, so what’s in the budget reports is basically left up to people’s imagination,” Armstrong says, adding: “Did the DOD improperly spend funds from one appropriated purpose on another? Who can tell?”

“The Defense Department remains the only federal agency in America that hasn’t been able to pass an independent audit—28 years after Congress required it to do so,” says Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. “That is unacceptable. The time is long overdue for us to take a hard look at the enormous amount of waste, at the cost overruns, at the fraud, and at the financial mismanagement that has plagued the Pentagon for decades.”

“The United States government collects trillions of dollars each year for the purpose of funding essential functions, including national-security efforts at the Defense Department,” Senator Grassley tells The Nation. “When unelected bureaucrats misuse, mismanage, and misallocate taxpayer funds, it not only takes resources away from vital government functions, it weakens citizens’ faith and trust in their government.”

For Spinney, this Pentagon accounting fraud is déjà vu all over again. Back in the 1980s, he and a handful of reform-minded colleagues exposed how the Defense Department used a similar accounting trick to inflate its spending—and to accumulate money for “off-the-books” programs. “DOD routinely overestimated inflation rates for weapons systems,” Spinney recalls. “When actual inflation turned out to be lower than the estimates, they did not return the excess funds to the Treasury, as required by law, but slipped them into something called a ‘merged surplus account.’

“In that way, the Pentagon was able to build up a slush fund of almost $50 billion,” Spinney adds—about $120 billion in today’s money. He believes that similar tricks are being used today to fund secret programs, possibly including US Special Forces activity in Niger. That program appears to have been undertaken without Congress’s knowledge of its true nature, which only came to light when a Special Forces unit was ambushed last year, resulting in the deaths of four US soldiers.

“Because of the plugs, there is no auditable way to track Pentagon funding and spending,” explains Asif Khan, who heads the National Security Asset Management unit at the Government Accountability Office, Congress’s watchdog on the federal bureaucracy. “It’s crucial in auditing to have a reliable financial record for prior years in order to audit the books for a current year.” Plugs and other irregularities help explain why the Pentagon has long been at or near the top of the GAO’s list of “high-risk” agencies prone to significant fraud, waste, and abuse, he adds.

The Nation submitted detailed questions and requested interviews with senior officials in the Defense Department before publishing this article. Only public-affairs staffers would speak on the record. In an e-mailed response, Christopher Sherwood of the DOD’s Public Affairs Office denied any accounting impropriety. Any transfer of funds between one budgetary account and another “requires a reprogramming action” by Congress, Sherwood wrote, adding that any such transfers amounting to more than 1 percent of the official DOD budget would require approval by “all four defense congressional committees.”
The scale and methods of the Pentagon’s accounting fraud began to be ferreted out last year by a dogged research team led by Mark Skidmore, a professor of economics specializing in state and local government finance at Michigan State University. Skidmore and two graduate students spent months poring over the financial-statement reviews done by the Defense Department’s Office of the Inspector General. Digging deep into the OIG’s report on the Army’s 2015 financial statement, the researchers found some peculiar information. Appendix C, page 27, reported that Congress had appropriated $122 billion for the US Army that year. But the appendix also appears to report that the Army had received a cash deposit from the US Treasury of $794.8 billion. That sum was more than six times what Congress had appropriated—indeed, it was larger than the entire Pentagon budget for the year. The same appendix showed that the Army had accounts payable (accounting lingo for bills due) totaling $929.3 billion.

“I wondered how you could possibly get those kinds of adjustments out of a $122 billion budget,” Skidmore says. “I thought, initially, ‘This is absurd!’ And yet all the [Office of the Inspector General] seemed to do was say, ‘Here are these plugs.’ Then, nothing—even though this kind of thing should be a red flag, it just died. So we decided to look further into it.”

To make sure that fiscal year 2015 wasn’t an anomaly, Skidmore and his graduate students expanded their inquiry, examining OIG reports stretching back to 1998. Time and again, they found that the amounts of money reported as having flowed into and out of the Defense Department were gargantuan, often dwarfing the money reported as having flowed into and out of the Department of Defense budget for the year. The same appendix showed that the Army had accounts payable (accounting lingo for bills due) totaling $929.3 billion.

In all, a mind-boggling $21 trillion (at a minimum) in financial transactions between 1998 and 2015 could not be traced, documented, or explained, Skidmore concluded.

To convey the vastness of that sum, $21 trillion is roughly five times more than the entire federal government spends in a year. It is greater than the US gross national product, the world’s largest at an estimated $18.8 trillion. And that $21 trillion includes only the plugs that were disclosed in reports by the Office of the Inspector General, which doesn’t review all of the Pentagon’s spending.

To be clear, Skidmore, in a report co-authored with Catherine Austin Fitts—a former assistant secretary at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, who complained about similar plugs in HUD’s financial statements—does not contend that all of this $21 trillion was secret or misused funding. And, indeed, plugs are found on both the positive and negative sides of the ledger, potentially netting each other out. But the Pentagon’s bookkeeping is so obtuse, Skidmore and Fitts add, that it’s impossible to trace the actual sources and destinations of the $21 trillion. The disappearance of those thousands of records adds further uncertainty. The upshot is that no one can know for sure how much of that $21 trillion was being spent legitimately.

This may even include the Pentagon’s senior leadership. A good example is Donald Rumsfeld, the notoriously micromanaging secretary of defense during the George W. Bush administration. On September 10, 2001, Rumsfeld called a press conference to make a startling announcement. Referring to the huge military budget that was his official responsibility, he said: “According to some estimates, we cannot track $2.3 trillion in transactions.”

This shocking news—that an amount more than five times as large as the Pentagon’s FY 2001 budget (an estimated $313 billion) was lost or even just “untrackable”—became a huge national story. So did Rumsfeld’s comment that America’s adversary wasn’t China or Russia, but “closer to home: It’s the Pentagon bureaucracy.” Equally stunning was Rumsfeld’s warning that tracking down those missing transactions “could be...a matter of life and death.” No Pentagon leader had ever before said such a thing, nor has any done so since. But Rumsfeld’s announcement quickly faded from the headlines when, the following morning, four hijacked airliners plowed full speed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. Since that time, there has been no follow-up, no effort made to find that missing money.

Recalling his decades at the Pentagon, Spinney emphasizes that the slippery bookkeeping and the resulting fraudulent financial statements are not a result of lazy DOD accountants. “You can’t look at this as an aberration,” he says. “It’s business as usual. The goal is to paralyze Congress.”

That has certainly been the effect. As one congressional staffer with extensive experience investigating Pentagon budgets—speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the need to continue working with DOD officials—told The Nation, “We don’t know how the Pentagon’s money is being spent. We know what the total appropriated funding is for each year, but we don’t know how much of that funding gets spent on the intended programs, what things actually cost, whether payments are going to the proper accounts. If this kind of stuff were happening in the private sector, people would be fired and prosecuted.”
DOD officials have long insisted that their accounting and financial practices are proper. For example, the Office of the Inspector General has attempted to explain away the absurdly huge plugs in the department’s financial statements as being a common, widely accepted accounting practice in the private sector.

In 2016, this reporter asked Bridget Serchak—at the time, a press spokesperson for the inspector general’s office—about the Army’s $6.5 trillion in plugs for fiscal year 2015. Serchak replied by e-mail: “Adjustments are made to the Army General Fund financial statement data…for various reasons such as correcting errors, reclassifying amounts and reconciling balances between systems. For example, there was a net unsupported adjustment of $99.8 billion made to the $0.2 billion balance reported for Accounts Receivable.”

There was a grain of truth in Serchak’s explanation, but only a grain. As an expert in government budgeting, Skidmore confirms that it’s accepted practice to insert adjustments into budget reports to make both sides of a ledger agree. Such adjustments can be used in cases where the receipts have been lost—in a fire, for example—or where funds were incorrectly classified as belonging to one division within a company rather than another. “But those kinds of adjustments should be the exception, not the rule, and should amount to only a small percentage of the overall budget,” Skidmore adds.

For its part, the inspector general’s office has blamed the fake numbers found in many of the DOD’s financial statements on the Defense Finance and Accounting Service, a huge DOD accounting operation based in Indianapolis. In review after review, the inspector general’s office has charged that the DFAS has been making up “unsupported” figures to plug into the Pentagon’s financial statements, inventing ledger entries to back up those invented numbers, and sometimes even “removing” transaction records that could document such entries. Nevertheless, the inspector general has never advocated punitive steps against DFAS officials—which suggests that higher-ups at the Pentagon tacitly approve of the deceptions.

Skidmore repeatedly requested explanations for these accounting practices, he says, but the Pentagon’s response was stonewalling and concealment. Even the inspector general’s office, whose publicly available reports have criticized these practices for years, refused to answer Skidmore’s questions; instead, it began removing the archived reports from its website. (Skidmore and his graduate students, anticipating this possibility, had already downloaded the documents, which were eventually restored to public access under different URLs.)

The Nation’s inquiries have met with similar resistance. Case in point: A recent report by the Office of the Inspector General on a US Navy financial statement for fiscal year 2017. Although OIG audit reports in previous years were always made available online without restriction or censorship, this particular report suddenly appeared in heavily redacted form—not just the numbers it contained, but even its title was obscured. Only bureaucratic sloppiness enabled an outside reader to see what the report was about: Censors missed some of the references to the Navy in the body of the document.

A request to the Office of the Inspector General to have the document unredacted was met with this response: “It was the Navy’s decision to censor it, and we can’t do anything about that.” At The Nation’s request, Senator Grassley’s office asked the OIG to uncensor the report. Again, the OIG refused. A Freedom of Information Act request by The Nation to obtain the uncensored document awaits a response.

The GAO’s Khan wasn’t surprised by the failure of this year’s independent audit of the Pentagon. Success, he points out, would have required “a good-faith effort from DOD officials, but to date that has not been forthcoming.” He added, “As a result of partial audits that were done in 2016, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines have over 1,000 findings from auditors about things requiring remediation. The partial audits of the 2017 budget were pretty much a repeat. So far, hardly anything has been fixed.”

L E T T H A T S I N K I N FOR A MOMENT: As things stand, no one knows for sure how the single biggest line item in the US government’s discretionary budget is actually being spent. What’s more, Congress as a whole has shown little interest in investigating this epic scandal. The ridiculously huge plugs in the Defense Department’s budgets are never even questioned at Armed Services or Budget Committee hearings.

One interested party has taken action—but in this case, it’s action likely to perpetuate the fraud. The normally obscure Federal Accounting Standards Advisory Board sets the accounting standards for all federal agencies. Earlier this year, the board proposed a new guideline allowing agencies that operate classified programs to falsify figures in financial statements and shift the accounting of funds in order to conceal classified operations. (No government agency operates more classified programs than the Department of Defense, which includes the National Security Agency.) The new guideline went into effect on October 4, just in time for this year’s end-of-year financial statements.

So here’s the situation: We have a Pentagon budget that a former DOD internal-audit supervisor, Jack Armstrong, bluntly labels “garbage.” We have a Congress unable to evaluate the Pentagon’s proposed budget for each new fiscal year, because it cannot know how much money the DOD actually spent in prior years. And we have a Department of Defense that only pays lip service to fixing any of this. Why should it? The status quo has been generating ever-higher DOD budgets for decades, not to mention bigger profits for Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and other military contractors.

The losers in this situation are everyone else. The Pentagon’s accounting fraud diverts many billions of dollars each year that could be devoted to other national needs: health care, education, job creation, climate action, infrastructure modernization, and more. Indeed, the Pentagon’s accounting fraud amounts to theft on a grand scale—not only from America’s taxpayers, but also from the nation’s well-being and its future.

As President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who retired from the military as a five-star general after leading the Allied forces to victory in World War II, said in a 1953 speech: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.” What would Eisenhower say today about a Pentagon that deliberately misleads the people’s representatives in Congress in order to grab more money for itself while hunger, want, climate breakdown, and other ills increasingly afflicting the nation?
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Rallying for rights: Sex workers and supporters at a demonstration in Madrid in 2014.

In Spain, a new sex workers’ union is fighting for labor rights—but some feminists are fighting the union.
ONXA BORRELL CAN BE HARD TO FIND. HER ASSOCIATION’S WEBSITE DOESN’T PROVIDE MUCH CONTACT INFORMATION, AND WHEN I TRACK DOWN HER NUMBER AND CALL, SHE MUMBLES A TIME AND PLACE FOR US TO MEET THE FOLLOWING DAY AND THEN QUICKLY HANGS UP. WHEN I ARRIVE AT THE DESIGNATED ADDRESS—a municipal building in Barcelona, in a gentrified, tree-lined neighborhood away from the city’s center—her organization isn’t listed in the directory. Someone finally points me to an unmarked classroom on the fourth floor, where I find Borrell alone, sitting upright at a desk. Wearing a beige sweater and a sprinkling of silver eyeshadow, her hair in a chic chignon, she looks like a high-school teacher. She does, in fact, teach: She leads workshops on branding, marketing, and price negotiation for sex workers. Borrell is the secretary general of Spain’s first sex workers’ union, and she’s fighting for its life.

The Organización de Trabajadoras Sexuales—OTRAS, for short, which poetically translates to “the other women”—was quietly green-lit in August 2018 by Spain’s Labor Ministry, while most senior politicians were away on summer vacation. (In Spain, unions must register with the government, which is usually a purely administrative procedure with no political oversight.) When Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez found out nearly a month later, he was aghast. His socialist cabinet, which boasts the highest number of female ministers in Spanish history, had vowed to make the pursuit of gender equality a priority when it took office in June 2018; the sale of sex, his government claims, is incompatible with that objective. Sánchez promised to roll back the union’s approval, and shortly after announced that he would introduce legislation banning prostitution. Feminist organizations throughout Spain urged him to follow through, and soon.

Spain straddles the line between two approaches to prostitution in the European Union and elsewhere backed by opposing feminist factions. One aims to abolish prostitution completely, as exemplified by Sweden, which criminalizes the purchase—though not the sale—of sex. The other approach, best seen in Germany and the Netherlands, is to legalize and regulate sex work. In Spain, prostitution is decriminalized but unregulated—frowned upon by political institutions but included in the national GDP. This legal gray area has long made Spain one of the world’s top sex-tourism destinations, bringing in $26.5 billion per year—almost twice as much as sex work in the United States. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but between 45,000 and 400,000 people are said to work as prostitutes in the country. For every public hospital, there are three brothels, and young men joke about ending a particularly drunken night in a *puticlub*—the way American undergrads hazily remember executing keg stands on Thirsty Thursday.

Meanwhile, those who work in the industry do so in the shadows—unable to claim basic labor rights, social security, or pensions, and at risk of being penalized for working in public spaces. That’s what Borrell hopes a union will change. But she’s up against a powerful abolitionist camp. Both sides wield the same feminist rhetoric to position themselves as women’s true defenders and accuse each other of being in bed with the patriarchy. At the heart of the debate is a question of whether selling sex is inherently exploitative—or whether its work that should be treated just like any other kind.

Meaghan Beatty is a Canada-based journalist covering politics and gender. She has written for The Guardian, New Statesman, and The Christian Science Monitor, and contributes to Public Radio International’s Across Women’s Lives.
After OTRAS was legalized, its two dozen or so members—who include women and men, both trans and cisgender—quickly found themselves engulfed in a national controversy. Prominent activists, academics, and media personalities swarmed social media under the hashtag #SoyAbolicionista (“I’m an Abolitionist”) to denounce what they saw as basic exploitation masquerading as the service economy. The union’s opponents argue that in a patriarchal society, women can’t be consenting parties in a paid sexual act born of financial necessity. They liken sex work to slavery, hence their name: “abolitionists.”

The most well-known voices among abolition activists are two young actresses based in Madrid, known together as Towanda Rebels, a name derived from a battle cry in the 1991 film Fried Green Tomatoes. Their fame predates OTRAS; in a December 2017 YouTube missive directed at sex clients called Hola, Puteru (“Hi, John”), they charged that all sex work is rape and called for its immediate ban. The video went viral, and Towanda Rebels shot to stardom. Today, they command a large and loyal social-media following—16,000 on Twitter, compared to OTRAS’s 3,000—and have launched and circulated multiple petitions and campaigns demanding OTRAS’s dissolution.

Mention Towanda to the members of OTRAS, and you’re likely to get an eye roll. “Look, they’ve blocked all of us,” Sánchez says, showing me her Twitter page on her phone as evidence. Borrell says they’ve reached out a number of times to the duo and other high-profile abolitionists, to discuss the pros and cons of regulating sex work on a panel or some other forum, but their offers are routinely rejected. When I contacted Towanda Rebels, they declined to speak with me after learning I’d be talking to OTRAS.

OTRAS calls this abolitionist opposition “the industry.” “They live really well off of their discussions, books, workshops, conferences, without ever including sex workers,” Necro says. “We’re not allowed to attend the feminist conventions.” OTRAS accuses “the industry” and the government—the two loudest arms of the abolitionist camp—of racism and classism, and is irked by their claims to feminism. “A government that refuses to guarantee the rights of the most vulnerable, poorest women—how is that feminist?” Borrell bristles. “We’re the feminists, the ones fighting for their rights.”

Whether legalizing prostitution would, in fact, increase trafficking is the subject of contentious debate. In 2016, Amnesty International released a model policy calling for decriminalization to protect the rights of sex workers, citing The Lancet and other organizations whose research indicated that criminalizing sex work doesn’t reduce trafficking but “often make[s] sex workers less safe and provide[s] impunity for abusers,” because the workers are “often too scared of being penalized to report crime.” Conversely, a 2013 World Development study of 150 nations concluded that “countries where prostitution is legal experience larger reported human trafficking inflows.”

In Spain, media and abolitionists often claim that up to 90 percent of prostitutes are trafficked, although this isn’t an official number. Borrell alleges the statistic is a misleading rephrasing of another figure—that 90 percent of sex workers in Spain are migrants. (The figure appears in a 2009 study by the European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion Among Migrant Sex Workers.) “Over time, ‘migrant women’ became ‘trafficked women’,” she says. Borrell claims she’s never met a trafficked girl. Sánchez says she has, but not in Spain. Necro remembers Eastern European girls who “clearly had been trafficked” while working with a porn company.

But most of OTRAS’s members work for themselves, which is an entirely different reality from the women who work in clubs or pisos, privately owned brothel “floors.” There, the line between “migrant” and “trafficked” can blur. Some women were conned back in their home countries by traffickers promising them a life of glamour and luxury in Europe. Others were forced into prostitution to pay off the debt of their passage to Spain. Still others came to Europe on their own but, unable to obtain legal status once there, turned to pimps.

“The trafficked women have no papers, so if police raid a club, the women have no choice but to say they’re there because they want to be,” says Rocio Nieto, the founder and president of the Asociación para la Prevención, Reinsertión y Atención a la Mujer Prostitutas (APRAMP), a leading organization against sexual exploitation. Over three decades, Nieto says she has worked with 1,500 women forced into prostitution from countries ranging from Paraguay and Venezuela to Romania and Nigeria.

Once law enforcement is out of earshot, Nieto says, “none of the women tell you they want to be there. None of them tell you they want to do that work.” The number of trafficked women in Spain is on the rise, she adds, in response to growing demand. Approximately 39 percent of Spanish men have paid for sex, and the clients keep getting younger: Today, on average, they’re barely 20. Legalizing prostitution, Nieto says, will only make it easier for organized criminal groups to traffic more women to feed this growing appetite.

Still, an abolitionist approach on its own won’t eliminate the more subtle forms of coercion—including legal and economic circumstances—that may push unauthorized
Holland and Germany are often pointed to as models for regulating sex work, while OTRAS’s inspiration comes from New Zealand, which in 2003 became one of the first countries in the world to decriminalize pimping, owning brothels, and purchasing sex after a campaign spearheaded by the New Zealand Prostitutes’ Collective. Critics, like the activist and journalist Julie Bindel, argue that the labor rights guaranteed by these laws end up benefiting pimps and brothel owners more than the sex workers themselves, reinforcing the power imbalances. Advocates, on the other hand, point to a 2014 case in New Zealand in which a sex worker brought a brothel to court over sexual harassment charges and won as evidence of that model’s effectiveness.

Norway, Iceland, Northern Ireland, Canada, and France have all adopted versions of Sweden’s abolition model, which criminalizes the purchase of sex. While this method does appear to reduce demand, it may put sex workers at greater risk. A 2018 French survey of nearly 600 sex workers, both migrants and citizens, concluded that France’s new law has made sex workers’ living and working conditions worse. They’ve lost their preferred regular clients and had to replace them with riskier customers; their wages have dropped; their work has been driven indoors, offering them less of a chance to appraise clients and possibly refuse them; and they’re more reluctant than ever to approach police. After a Peruvian trans prostitute was murdered in France in August 2018, sex workers there rallied against the law.

The question of whether prostitution should be treated as a legitimate form of work has long been under debate, but the issue is gaining momentum in Spain at least in part because sex workers finally have viable political allies. Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau, once hailed as the world’s most radical mayor by The Guardian, has consistently thrown her support behind the city’s sex workers. When the national government vowed to nullify OTRAS’s legalization, she denounced its “hypocrisy” on national television. “Big businesses are allowed to thrive off the sexual exploitation of many women, but the women are not allowed to organize themselves to defend their rights,” she argued.

Her party, Barcelona en Comú, along with other regulation advocates, argues that sex work should not be conflated with trafficking. (Globally, the majority of people trafficked are coerced into other forms of labor, like agriculture or domestic work.) “They’re two different realities and need to be dealt with differently,” says Marta Cruells Lopez, a gender equality advisor to the Barcelona City Council. While human trafficking—a transnational crime—requires a concerted international response, Cruells Lopez argues that securing sex workers’ rights can be done on the local level. En Comú has suggested establishing government-regulated brothels to allow sex workers to work independently of pimps in controlled environments.

A handful of smaller radical-left parties also back OTRAS, as well as one unlikely ally: the right-wing Ciudadanos party, known for its harsh anti-immigration stance, among other more traditionally conservative postures. “Experience shows us that when the State refuses to regulate, the mafias make the rules,” the party’s press corps wrote me in an e-mail.

“Elections are in May,” OTRAS’s Sabrina Sánchez reminded me, wearily, when we met. The union is conscious of being courted for votes—a departure from previous years, when the rights of sex workers were an unpalatable topic in the political sphere, even though prostitution is as much a part of Spanish society as chocolate con churros. “At the end of the day, it’s really there, embedded in society,” Sánchez says. “Someone always knows someone who did it for a while.” Her hairdresser, who couldn’t find any work when she first moved here from Peru; a family friend who did it to survive during the Spanish Civil War. “We have to show that we’re not the protagonist in Diary of a Call Girl,” she continues, “and we’re not poor victims tied up in a basement either.”

On November 21, Borrell, Sánchez, and a few other members of OTRAS gathered on a busy plaza before Barcelona’s central train station to hold a press conference. Two nights before, Spain’s highest court had voided the union’s bylaws on the basis that prostitution did not legally qualify as work and that, therefore, prostitutes could not legally unionize. However, sex workers in other parts of the industry—be it in porn or the so-called gentlemen’s clubs—could. Feminist groups who’d brought the charge forward hailed the decision as a major victory.

“They fucked our morning,” Conxa Borrell said with a throaty laugh. She’d expected the ruling and called it “useless,” since the union had planned on meeting three days later to rewrite the bylaws anyway. But they’re appealing the Court’s decision. For now, the union still stands as a political entity—and, according to Borrell, its work is just beginning.
YANIS VAROUFAKIS’S INTERNATIONALIST ODYSSEY

The former Greek finance minister is on a quest to unite the global left.

by Atossa Araxia Abrahamian
On November 25, at a hip “event loft” in Berlin, Yanis Varoufakis announced that he’d be campaigning for office in two countries at once. In the spring, the former Greek finance minister had declared his intention to run for prime minister back home in Athens—and in ordinary times, that might have been enough. Today, though, “discontent, xenophobia, and precariously are on a triumphant march” around the world, as Varoufakis told his mostly German audience.

Flanked by a dozen members of DiEM25, the pan-European movement launched in 2016 to “democratize” the continent’s institutions, Varoufakis announced that he would run for a seat representing Germany in the European Parliament. He would make his bid as a Greek, a European, and, you might even say, a Berliner—all to drive home a larger point about the necessity of thinking beyond borders. “No European people can be prosperous and free when other European countries are condemned to the permanent depression that eternal austerity creates,” he said.

Persistent unemployment, cuts to welfare, and other suffocating economic policies across the continent help explain why Varoufakis chose Germany—a country he’s best known for antagonizing, precisely over its leaders’ support for austerity, in the fraught negotiations over Greece’s debt in 2015. These circumstances are also the motivating force behind the Progressive International, an initiative that Varoufakis launched five days later in Burlington, Vermont, with DiEM25 and the Sanders Institute.

Building broad-based coalitions takes time, and for now, the Progressive International is just a website with some inspir language and a video. Its membership is also very Eurocentric. But Varoufakis hopes it will blossom into a global movement that helps leftists create coherent platforms, policies, and parties to defeat the “nationalist international” masterminded by Donald Trump’s former chief strategist, Steve Bannon.

The logic is simple. Financiers have long had global networks; now, right-wing authoritarians do too, with coordinated social-media strategies and deep pools of dark money funding campaigns and disrupting elections around the globe. It’s time for the left to go on the offensive and reclaim its tradition of internationalism: in Varoufakis’s words, to “mobilize workers, women, and the disenfranchised around the world” to prevent outright fascism from taking hold. This means local action, but it also means dreaming big.

It’s a fuzzy plan, of course, and one that Varoufakis’s critics deem implausible. Aren’t ideas like “democratizing” the European Union and making global finance more “progressive” oxymorons? How will a ragtag group of leftists dream up a new monetary system and an ecological New Deal for the whole world when Goldman Sachs and ExxonMobil call the shots?

Then again, pockets of the left—and even popular officials like potential 2020 presidential candidate Bernie Sanders—are starting to rally behind an internationalism that seeks to displace the right’s authoritarian nationalism with a more egalitarian vision of global politics. “In order to effectively combat the rise of the international authoritarian axis, we need an international progressive movement…that addresses the massive global inequality that exists, not only in wealth but in political power,” Sanders wrote in The Guardian in September.

Varoufakis hopes the Progressive International will be able to help supporters move beyond kaffeeklatsch and “kick-start the process of giving [the global left] substance.” To that end, he’s been on the road nonstop since Berlin trying to bring his vision into the world: making appearances with Sanders and other prominent left leaders, like Fernando Haddad, who lost the race for Brazil’s presidency to Jair Bolsonaro in October; speaking at universities and community centers; recording podcasts and writing op-eds.

Along the way, Varoufakis has found that not everyone is taken with his commitment to freedom of movement and his conviction that the European Union should remain. For practical reasons and sometimes philosophical ones, parties like Labour in the United Kingdom, Podemos in Spain, and Die Linke in Germany operate as if social democracy in their own country is more important than a socialism that crosses borders. Varoufakis’s outlook is more expansive; that’s what makes his radical leftist internationalism so challenging, and yet so necessary.

Our days after his speech in Berlin, Varoufakis flew to Vermont, disembarked in Burlington’s tiny international airport, and made his way to a cocktail reception at an aquarium on Lake Champlain.

The evening was hosted by the nonprofit Sanders Institute, which is run by Jane O’Meara Sanders (Bernie’s spouse) and her son David Driscoll. The Vermont senator, who was also present, has no formal role in the institute or in the Progressive International; nevertheless, he was the main attraction for the crowd of community organizers, political staffers, progressive politicians, and reporters in attendance. “I’ve never seen so many sensible shoes in my life,” remarked a guest from Los Angeles, scanning the room.

Varoufakis, who turned up wearing Doc Martens and with a leather jacket slung over his shoulder, immediately began making the rounds, exchanging handshakes and bear hugs with friends and colleagues. When the lines of his face settle into a mischievous smirk, you get the sense that Varoufakis is operating on two levels: in the present day, which is full of distractions, cumbersome details, and bothersome personalities; and in the Hegelian zeitgeist, the forward march of history, where his worldview comes into clear, urgent focus in opposition to the dominant reactionary forces. “There’s a clear dilemma,” Varoufakis
told me the next morning. “Either we move down that road of toxic politics with the renationalization of authoritarian power, or we move towards an internationalism.”

The challenge, of course, is to connect the two planes and turn everyday activism into something more potent than the sum of its parts. That’s hard for an internationalist left to do when elections themselves are nationally bounded and when right-wing governments hold so much political power.

While traditional activists might start small—organizing a community, a union, or some other managably sized group—Varoufakis has tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice through clever hacks. He registered as a candidate in Germany thanks to a rarely used regulation allowing any European with proof of residence within the country to run; to establish it, Varoufakis simply rented an apartment from a German friend. Billionaires shift their tax residence all the time; why shouldn’t leftists?

Back when Varoufakis was a finance minister and thinking of contingency plans to keep Greece running should it be forced out of the euro, he considered recruiting a childhood friend to hack into the country’s digital tax infrastructure in order to assign each account credits so that people could continue spending. Then, in February, DiEM25 was part of an effort to convince the European Parliament to hand over the seats that Britain lost as a result of Brexit to transnational parties like theirs. That failed, but interventions like these can push the limits of where we think politics can happen.

For the launch of the Progressive International, Varoufakis pulled no flashy tricks; he just sat on a panel with Bernie Sanders, economist Jeffrey Sachs, Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau, and Canadian MP Niki Ashton. A short promotional video created by the self-described “anti-capitalist propaganda” firm Means of Production laid out the new movement’s agenda. The video struck an ominous note and featured centrist figures like Bill and Hillary Clinton, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel spliced between Trump, Bannon, Bolsonaro, and Philippine strongman Rodrigo Duterte—clearly implicating the liberal establishment in the current crisis. “Where globalization promised prosperity, it’s delivered financial crisis and endless war instead,” a woman’s voice, speaking with a British accent, warned over throbbing electronic dance music. “The time has come to form our own common front in the fight for peace and prosperity.”

Varoufakis appears in the video for only a couple of seconds, but he might as well have written it. “Globalization was all about the freedom of capital and the unfreedom of people,” he told me. “Internationalism should be all about freedom of humans…and restraining the financial genie. Money is a public good that is never privately produced, [so] it has to be publicly controlled.”

Without him saying as much, you get the sense that Varoufakis wants us all to live in the transnational world he’s in. It’s a world where any Greek citizen can not only move to Germany to live and work, but also participate in its political life. It’s a world where international finance is something easy (or at least possible) to understand and to battle; a world where ordinary people end up with a real say in Europe’s—and the world’s—most powerful institutions.

In fact, Varoufakis is currently at work on his fifth mass-market book—“my Utopia,” he called it, referring to the 16th-century political satire by Thomas More. The Shaken Superflux—the book’s working title—seeks to answer, from the vantage point of 2035, questions like: “How could the world be structured differently? How could society function differently?”

The book’s premise is that the 2008 financial crash was so cataclysmic that it split the space-time continuum. This bifurcation created two trajectories: the current course of events, and another in which the left didn’t squander the crisis and instead seized the world’s trading desks to bring down financialized capital. “I’m using science-fiction tools to get glimpses into how this would look,” Varoufakis said. The book’s subtitle: “Dispatches From an Alternative Present.”

“Nothing good will happen in Europe unless it starts in Germany.”
—Yannis Varoufakis

Virtually everyone at the Vermont conference agreed that the Progressive International’s basic thrust is laudable. But as Varoufakis has begun to pitch his grand vision—which he insists must be paired with policies and planned actions—more prosaic concerns about elections, alliances, and, well, politics have come into play.

Take his electoral campaigns in Europe. In Germany as in Greece, Varoufakis’s platform consists of an expansive “New Deal” to end austerity across the continent. In both countries, he is running as a member of DiEM25; European Spring, the transnational partnership that DiEM25 has created with like-minded parties, now counts some 100 candidates sharing a platform across the EU.

They’re not in it to win, exactly. After all, Varoufakis is a game theorist; he knows the chances of victory are slim. It’s still early days, but parties under the European Spring umbrella—Benoît Hamon’s Génération.s in France, Alternativet in Denmark, and Razem in Poland, to name just a few—are polling around 3 percent of the vote or less. Even if they somehow prevail, said Michael Broening, a political analyst at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, a think tank affiliated with the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the European Spring project is severely limited.

“Varoufakis’s Diem25 is proof that in Europe, personal celebrity status does not automatically translate into political influence,” Broening wrote in an e-mail. “Essentially what we are looking at is another radical-left fringe movement that aims to unite the left but could ultimately further divide it. Its adamant pro-
European stance is unlikely to act as a rallying call.”

Indeed: Varoufakis’s run from Germany is a repudiation of Euroskepticism; a middle finger to his fascist, centrist, and leftist critics; and an epic troll, all rolled into one (though he prefers to call it “symbolic”).

“We wanted to show that business cannot continue [in] the old-fashioned way, which is to set up a national party [and] issue a manifesto that promises all sorts of things within your own country, independently of what’s happening next door and in Europe at large,” Varoufakis explained, taking care to speak of his party as a collective, in the plural. “Our line is: Nothing good will happen in Europe unless it starts in Germany. If you want to change the Roman Empire, you begin in Rome. You do not begin in Athens, you do not begin in Londinium; you begin in Rome.”

This aspect of Varoufakis’s politics is far from mainstream. Nationalism is the default ideology for the extreme right, but the nation is also the framework within which most center and left parties shape tax policy, government services, and everything in between (after all, that’s where they hold power.) Now, debates over immigration are pushing parties on the left to choose sides. DiEM25’s priority is to end “forced” migration—whether the people are migrating as a matter of safety or economic necessity—while preserving freedom of movement as a matter of principle. But others are prepared to take Hillary Clinton’s advice and make concessions on the number of migrants they’re willing to admit in their countries for the sake of winning elections. Die Linke, one Germany’s biggest left parties, is split on this very question; France’s Jean-Luc Mélenchon has railed against the downward pressure that immigration exerts on wages, and his party has recently refused to sign an open letter welcoming migrants.

Whether the European Union is worth salvaging is also a divisive question among progressives. UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, with whom Varoufakis has discussed the Progressive International, has hardly been a fierce advocate of Britain’s remaining in the EU, and he’s said that he will not attempt to reverse Brexit if elected prime minister. Corbyn would’ve been welcome in Vermont, but he opted to attend his friend Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s inauguration as the next president of Mexico instead. (“We must never forget the human dimensions—an important part of leftist politics!” Varoufakis rationalized, noting that Corbyn’s wife is Mexican).

Given these kinds of disagreements, what Varoufakis wants is to push an alternative narrative to “left populism,” which advocates a fortress-like conception of social democracy. He characterizes any kind of populism as an outright capitulation to the far right. “And that’s why we’re not with them,” he said, explaining why DiEM25 had opted to form its own faction instead of joining the existing leftist coalitions in Europe.

“I feel bad that they have not come to discuss a common program so that we can run together,” Varoufakis continued. “I do not feel bad that we’re taking away votes from them, because they will lose. They will keep becoming irrelevant as long as they stick to lowest-common-denominator programs.”

Winnie Wong, the co-founder of People for Bernie who now advises Die Linke and Podemos, sees this tactic as alienating and impractical. “Yanis wanted other parties to adopt his platform,” she said. “But [Podemos leader] Pablo Iglesias didn’t want to be part of it. He didn’t think it would help him win more seats.”

Wong and other Bernie-adjacent organizers travel frequently to Europe to participate in workshops about getting out the vote and canvassing, and she told me that she’s noticed a resurgence of internationalist thought—and praxis—in the past two years. Still, she added, “we don’t believe in parachuting in as Americans”—implying that Varoufakis is doing something similar, making unwelcome interventions into national elections. “We think the best way is not to interfere with what they’re doing.”

Varoufakis, Wong contends, has not done the boring, everyday legwork at the local level to build popular support. Since his political trajectory took him straight from an economics department to Brussels (and, just as quickly, back again), she sees his lack of buy-in from Europe’s established parties as a major shortcoming.

“Yanis is a very talented troll,” Wong said, noting that his skills might be better suited to running the European Central Bank, not fighting for votes in two national political races. (Varoufakis might agree, but there’s the rub: The top job at the ECB isn’t a democratically elected position.) “He has a great platform that no one disagrees with—and if this is a narrative intervention, that’s great. But he’s in the tower. He’s creating strategies in the tower.”
“Of course we need progressive internationalism,” said Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of the socialist magazine *Jacobin*, which has reading groups and sister publications in several countries. “But it’s not clear to me how [the Progressive International] relates to the existing—and, at times, quite effective—networks of international cooperation on the left.

“We have a party of the European left; we have think tanks and institutes; parties share experiences and strategies,” Sunkara continued. Varoufakis’s new effort “will make a media splash, but I’m just not sure what the value is of having something else.”

**Bernie Sanders, for his part, is noticeably cautious when discussing Varoufakis’s initiative in institutional terms. “We’re talking about it,” he said during a break at the Vermont conference. Still, he added, “the demagogues and authoritarians are coming together, and it’s important that we do, too.”**

A Sanders staffer explained that it was important to separate the Sanders Institute from the senator’s legislative work, and that while Sanders is supportive of all the ideas that Varoufakis is pushing, the Progressive International remains the former Greek finance minister’s project, not his. It’s also hard not to wonder how an alliance with the Progressive International would look to the Washington establishment if Sanders were someday president, given that Varoufakis has spoken at various times of “nationalizing and internationalizing” profits from social-media platforms, rebuilding the world’s monetary system, banning trading on the stock market—period—and other decidedly radical initiatives.

Still, while Sanders might not be buying in as a US senator, it doesn’t change the fact that the language of the Progressive International and his own rhetoric in recent months align almost perfectly. There’s the same focus on wealth inequality, oligarchy, and power; it’s just that one of them is much more inclined to quote Karl Marx.

On the final public appearance of his US tour, Varoufakis spoke on a panel at Mayday, a community center in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. His wife, Danae, had accompanied him, and they both seemed at ease in the run-down building, making small talk and drinking cheap wine out of plastic cups in the “green room”—a shabby corner of an office on the second floor. “You travel thousands of miles and you still end up in Exarchia,” joked David Adler, an American who works closely with Varoufakis on the Progressive International, referring to an anarchist neighborhood in Athens.

Soon, they were joined by state Senator-elect Julia Salazar, a democratic socialist, and New York City public-advocate candidate Nomiki Konst, a former journalist who’d visited the couple at their vacation home on a Greek island last summer.

The evening prior, Varoufakis had appeared at the New School with Haddad, the leader of the Workers Party, the largest left party in Brazil. Earlier in the day, he’d met with a group of progressives in Manhattan to start fleshing out what, exactly, the Progressive International would try to achieve. Just days before, he’d been schmoozing with Sanders and the actors John Cusack and Danny Glover. In contrast, the panel with Salazar spoke on a panel at Mayday, a community center in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. His wife, Danae, had accompanied him, and they both seemed at ease in the run-down building, making small talk and drinking cheap wine out of plastic cups in the “green room”—a shabby corner of an office on the second floor. “You travel thousands of miles and you still end up in Exarchia,” joked David Adler, an American who works closely with Varoufakis on the Progressive International, referring to an anarchist neighborhood in Athens.

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The historian Perry Miller observed, in his 1952 essay “Errand Into the Wilderness,” that most American histories are stories of decline. From the Puritans on, we find the recurring theme that the country has fallen away from a set of high ideals that once prevailed. Miller argued that the intense piety of the early settlers created a standard impossible for later generations to meet, which led, in turn, to profound disappointment and a sense that their country itself had failed. It was, he suggested, a familiar feeling: “Many a man has done a brave deed, been hailed as a public hero, had honors and ticker tape heaped upon him—and then had to live, day after day, in the ordinary routine, eating breakfast and brushing his teeth, in what seems protracted anticlimax.”

Kim Phillips-Fein is the author, most recently, of Fear City: The New York City Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics (Metropolitan Books).

ATLAS WEEPS
Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge’s strange elegy for capitalism

by KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN

Capitalism in America
A History
Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge
Penguin Press. 496 pp. $35

This fallen state is the world depicted in Capitalism in America, an account of US economic history co-authored by Alan Greenspan, the former chair of the Federal Reserve, and journalist Adrian Wooldridge. Part popular history, part political intervention, part subtle exoneration of Greenspan for
Despite Capitalism in America's libertarian hue, its explicit intellectual reference point isn't Ayn Rand, whose name is barely mentioned, but the Austrian economic thinker Joseph Schumpeter, especially the oft-cited notion of "creative destruction" developed in his 1942 book Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy. Greenspan and Wooldridge return repeatedly to Schumpeter and the "perennial gale" of economic change in their analysis of American history. Under capitalism, Schumpeter argued, new production processes are constantly displacing old ones, leading to great tumult (the decline of cities, the wiping out of whole occupations)—but also rapid growth. In the past, Greenspan and Wooldridge argue, "America has been much better than almost every other country at resisting the temptation to interfere with the logic of creative destruction." But today, this is no longer the case.

The authors trace the hospitality of the United States toward capitalist growth, including its destructive possibilities, to the restrictions that its founders placed on popular or majority rule. "The Founding Fathers had been careful to put limits on both the scope of the state and the power of the people," they write. Even though they hail American capitalism as "the world's most democratic" example of the system—in that people born in obscurity have risen to riches, and also in the spread of mass consumption—they approve of the ways in which American politics constraints democratic power.

The result, in their view, is what led to the era of entrepreneurial dominance that lasted for most of the 19th century—the "age of giants." Greenspan and Wooldridge praise the high "respect" with which Americans then treated businessmen; apparently, they have long understood that "the real motors of historical change were not workers, as Marx had argued, nor abstract economic forces, as his fellow economists tended to imply, but people who built something out of nothing." Americans rightly worship at the shrine of business, what Greenspan and Wooldridge call the "cult of the entrepreneur."

Another reason for America's explosive entrepreneurialism, we are told, is that the 19th century was also the age of the gold standard. For most of the book, the prose is workmanlike, jammed with statistics about economic growth. But when the subject turns to gold, lyrical invocations of timelessness creep in: "Gold has always been acceptable as a means of exchange, and hence a store of value, as far back as history reaches." It has long served as "one of the most solid defenses of liberal society against the temptation to debauch the currency, the monetary equivalent of property rights." Conservatives in the late 19th century saw it as "a bulwark not just against economic chaos but against civilizational collapse." One has the feeling that Greenspan and Wooldridge may see it this way, too.

For Greenspan and Wooldridge, the age of gold was not always a golden age. They are careful to point out the underside of growth. American men lost an average of two inches in height over the course of the late 19th century; there was horrific pollution as well as terrible industrial accidents; and deflation hurt debtors and wage earners. Early in the book, they point out that slavery and the displacement of indigenous peoples also constituted stains on America's history. But none of this matters as much, in their view, as the fact of the country's remarkable economic growth.

They thus treat the stormy politics of the late 19th century with a mixture of amusement and disdain. "Anxiety" about the scale of economic change—rather than real and legitimate questions about the nature of the emerging economy and its effects on working Americans—fed the "cult of government" in the Progressive era. When the Populists organized against the gold standard, they "extended the realm of politics" to include economic relationships that had previously been considered sacrosanct. For Greenspan and Wooldridge, this was the beginning of the end. After World War I, there was a brief reverie to the doctrine of laissez-faire. The "active inactivism" of Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge is cited for praise, but it was a brief "paradise before the fall." Then came the Great Depression and the era of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and the nation has never recovered since.
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Not surprisingly, Greenspan and Wooldridge express great enthusiasm for the presidency of Ronald Reagan. He not only removed the “shackles” that had bound business during the New Deal and postwar years; more important, in their view, Reagan had “an instinctive faith in business,” and entrepreneurs, in particular, formed “the prae託ian guard of his revolution.” The authors are also enthusiastic about Bill Clinton and the way his tenure marked the “revival of entrepreneurialism,” and the financial revolution—junk bonds and all—that made it possible.

Some readers may be tempted to skip ahead to the concluding chapters for some insight into how Greenspan views recent economic events, especially those in which he himself was involved. However, anyone looking for particular evidence of how the economy looked from the viewpoint of the Federal Reserve will be disappointed. Very little appears in these pages that would shed any real light on the debates at the Fed, or on Greenspan’s own contributions to the creative destruction of American capitalism. The closest that Capitalism in America comes to engaging the question of whether Greenspan might bear some culpability for the 2008 financial crash is to observe that while “some critics” have suggested that the low interest rates of the early 2000s helped to drive speculative home-buying and thus the housing bubble, these skeptics “can’t establish a clear link between monetary loosening and the crisis.” While some readers may be frustrated by this coyness, it is in keeping with the overall approach of the book, which downplays public policy in favor of broad statements about America’s great economic culture. Greenspan and Wooldridge insist that our principal problem is that the United States has become “enraptured with entitlements” that crowd out other forms of saving and diminish America’s spirit of entrepreneurialism. Meanwhile, “overregulation forces business founders to endure a Kafkaesque nightmare of visiting different government departments and filling in endless convoluted forms.”

The early Trump years—with their huge corporate-tax cuts and reduction in regulations—offer the occasion for mild cheer, though the authors also note with concern the president’s antagonism toward free trade and his failure to drain the swamp of the regulatory state. Either way, their message is clear: Where once we had prairies, railroads, and an open expanse of light and air, we now have only bureaucracy.

Greenspan and Wooldridge’s historical scholarship leaves much to be desired. Their depiction of the 19th-century American economy as a paragon of laissez-faire seems at a distant remove from actual history. True, it did have the gold standard, and taxes were few, and the federal government did not employ many people. But the enslavement of millions of people—whose labor was actually the engine of economic growth in the early years of the 19th century—in fact required an activist state. The decentralized violence of slavery should not disguise the intrusive regime that was needed to uphold in practice the idea that human beings could be treated as commodities.

After the end of slavery, too, the state played a key role in economic life. Breaking strikes with the National Guard, giving Western lands to railroad companies, overturning state and local regulations for the labor market via the Supreme Court—all of these involved the active use of state power. The industrial powerhouse that the United States became was also not a free-trade haven; for much of the era of industrial growth, its manufacturing companies were protected by high tariffs. There was no near-unanimous sentiment, even among the educated, about the virtues of the idea that society should be governed by the “survival of the fittest”—from the American Revolution on, many were critical of the outside power that economic might could give some people over the lives of others.

Rather than the tale of a free people coming to be dominated by government control, the story of the United States in the late-19th and early-20th centuries is really one of political conflict over who would control the state. And our contemporary politics remains centered on this conflict: Should business leaders be able to dominate government? Or is there something in democratic politics that authorizes the majority of people to shape their society together? Greenspan and Wooldridge seem to view the market and the state as two distinct and antagonistic realms, but in truth they were never as easy to separate as Capitalism in America suggests.

Nor were the massive transformations of daily life that the book chronicles simply the product of brilliant entrepreneurial innovations: As the economic historian Robert Gordon has written, the improvements in health, mortality, and the quality of life in the late-19th and 20th centuries reflect public as well as private investments. What is more, bemoaning the loss of the growth rates that characterized the 19th century makes little sense. For one thing, rising productivity was even more dramatic between 1920 and 1970—years that Greenspan and Wooldridge insist already contained the seeds of decline. As important, the social changes that swept the United States in the late-19th and 20th centuries—the spread of electricity, the movement of millions of people from farms to cities—are not likely to be repeated, not because there are too many regulations now, but because these are the types of transformations that cannot unfold twice.
one of “out-of-control entitlements and ill-considered regulations.” Scrap these, and the “madness of great men” like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel will once again be able to transform society. But who—outside of the inner circle, the most devout of the faithful—really believes that this would be a good thing?

While *Capitalism in America* falls short as a work of history, its larger problems are political. On the one hand, the whole framework of “creative destruction” implies a tremendous condescension toward those who dared to impede the march of progress. Contrary to what Greenspan and Wooldridge suggest, their grievances were not mere sour grapes, the whining and complaints of those left behind; what was at stake was always the question of who would benefit from economic change and the kind of social order it would make possible. By framing the issue as a simple resistance to technology and growth, Greenspan and Wooldridge sidestep the underlying questions about democracy, equality, and freedom that are at the heart of this long-standing struggle.

The former chairman of the Fed, it seems, never left behind his childhood obsession with railroad barons and glorious entrepreneurs after all. Perhaps at the start of the Reagan years, this invocation of the market’s wonders still seemed inspiring, the opening bell in a beautiful race. Now it reads like no more than a call to protect the wealthy people who benefited from decades of state-backed economic redistribution upward.

Schumpeter himself would likely have said as much: For him, capitalist growth was not only about rising productivity, but also the transformation of social relationships, and he was closely attuned to the ways that the economic changes brought about by capitalism could also undercut its cultural and political support. In particular, Schumpeter warned that the very march of economic progress meant the doom of the entrepreneur: Over time, the development of technology and of the corporation would render obsolete the role of the lone economic actor, as “teams of trained specialists” and “rationalized and specialized office work” took the place of the robber barons of yesteryear. Back in 1952, Perry Miller wrote that, after the fervor had dissipated and the disappointment had been worked through, people would find themselves forced to confront their country as it actually existed. *Capitalism in America* aside, that’s where we are now.

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**Why We Have No Future**

I want to be free
To get up in the morning, pee
And not come back to bed.
We have no future together, he said
Drawing a line in the sand
Of my chest, my nipples
Rival castles divided by decree.
What did he see in the leaves
Of his tea, prognosticator,
Diviner. Sooth is not so soothing
When it’s removing what was built
Even temporary, on a beach,
Facing erasure, wave after wave.
How much farther is the future.
Is it a grave, is it a disease, is it
Looming is it booming is it bust.
We will see each other there
In the future. Not see as in see
But see, will we be visible
To one another or blank, blank
As a blank we fill in later
With the wrong amount on a
Receipt we’re turning in
To be reimbursed. What were
We worth. What did we cost.
In the future will it matter
What is lost. It will not be
A human trait to remember.
We will have made ourselves
Redundant, inefficient, and
Less desirable than what can
Be invented, ordered on a screen.
In the future we’ll check in
Yet never see each other. Lost
In the lobby of a grand hotel
Where nobody works. In the hotel
Of the future nobody wakes you.
In the hotel of the future nobody
Makes the food. It tastes of nobody.
It doesn’t matter, I says,
Futures are over-rated. Castles,
Too. And you, man, and you.

D.A. POWELL
In a famous essay published in the January 1971 issue of ARTnews, Linda Nochlin reiterated the question that was constantly thrown in the faces of women who dared to paint or sculpt: “Why have there been no great women artists?” For Nochlin, it seemed obvious that no effort to respond with a historical counterexample would serve. Not that Artemisia Gentileschi or Berthe Morisot shouldn’t be taken more seriously than male art historians had done thus far. But still: “The fact, dear sisters, is that there are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol,” she wrote, adding for good measure, “any more than there are Black American equivalents for the same.” The art historian’s problem in her view was to show why.

The assumption that there were no great black American artists at the time was not Nochlin’s alone, nor one that existed only among whites. A couple of months after her essay was published, one of the best-known and most successful African-American artists of the day, Benny Andrews, wrote a long, troubled letter to a fellow painter, Reginald Gammon, reporting on an opening party at New York’s Museum of Modern Art for two exhibitions by black artists, the painter and collagist Romare Bearden and the sculptor Richard Hunt. It should have been “the kind of night that all of us had fought for individually and as groups,” Andrews ac-
knowledged, but he was in no mood to celebrate. “The shows were good, no more no less, not spectacular or even moving, just good and everyday art work by two people that except for being Black probably won’t leave any imprint on the art world.” One might easily ascribe Andrews’s letdown to sour grapes, but in articulating the source of his anguish, he hardly let himself off the hook: “What I think most of us know and are hesitant to admit is the fact that in the graphic arts, painting and sculpture, the discrimination against Black people has proven to have pretty much guaranteed that we have not really created anything in a way that makes any of us truly creative. I do not know of anyone Black that as a painter or sculptor is truly creative like say Andy Warhol, Stella, Eakins, [de] Kooning or anyone that we can identify.”

More than four decades later, one might demur when it comes to Bearden, at least: The resonance of his work keeps growing with time. If accounts could ever be well and truly settled, I’m not sure that he would rank lower than de Kooning and Warhol, the two contemporaries that Nochlin and Andrews seemed to agree were incontrovertibly among the “truly creative.” In art, consensus on what counts as “creativity” or “greatness” is always in flux. Two hundred years ago, Raphael was a god and Caravaggio a nobody; today, Raphael mostly earns our devotion. A strict conceptualist might have wanted to tell Nochlin that Picasso and Matisse were sideshows, that the truly great artist of their time was Duchamp. The arguments continue.

Andrews was painfully aware that there were structural impediments not only to the proper recognition of his achievement but to that achievement as such. Like any serious modern artist, he was fiercely ambitious, and his ambition was of the broadest scope: to be one of the “truly creative” who leave an imprint on their time and on the art world. His paintings, prints, and collages have recently been visible in a number of significant group exhibitions large and small—the biggest of them being “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” a survey of African-American art that focuses on the 1960s and ’70s (plus a few white fellow travelers), now at the Brooklyn Museum through February 3. The show, curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, originated at London’s Tate Modern before traveling first to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, and will finish its tour at the Broad in Los Angeles. I’d like to think that if Andrews were still around to see the show, he might revise the view he held in 1971. He might see, in retrospect, that a number of black artists—Bearden being only one among them—were producing work that was much more than just “good and everyday” in quality, and that if their imprint on the art world wasn’t entirely clear at the moment, it has deepened (and continues to do so) to this day. Further, the experience of being black was not incidental to the development of the qualities that give their work its lasting power, no matter whether it enters into their subject matter—as with Bearden, or photographer Roy DeCarava, or assemblagist John Outterbridge—or seems far from obvious, as with the abstract paintings of Alma Thomas or Ed Clark.

What gives much of the work in the exhibition its power is the incessant questioning—and self-questioning—that animates it. If Cézanne’s doubt was the key to his art, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed, and anxiety his great lesson, as Picasso said—well, these African-American artists had been given plenty of that to work with, as the example of Andrews shows. Their doubt became an impetus for their art, even at the price of a seeming inconsistency or opacity, and their work is all the richer for it. That’s why, although the arrival of “Soul of a Nation” is a cause for celebration, Andrews’s pessimism stayed on my mind as I looked at the show—as the extreme expression of the self-questioning that most of these artists must have sometimes gone through, but that, at best, spurred rather than stymied their efforts.
I found Andrews's letter not in "Soul of a Nation" or its catalog, but on display in a vitrine in another, much smaller exhibition that happened to overlap with it, "Acts of Art and Rebuttal in 1971," at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Gallery at New York City's Hunter College, where it was put together by Howard Singerman, Sarah Watson, and their students. The show was a look back at a 1971 exhibition organized by black artists, including Andrews, to protest the decision by the Whitney Museum to mount a show that year called "Contemporary Black Artists in America" without a single black curator participating in the selection process, or even much follow-through on the museum's own tepid promise to "utilize the advice of leading Black Art experts wherever feasible." Museum officials claimed the right, and the duty, to present art according to their sense of its quality, but they never considered using that art to put their own criteria to the test. Their downfall was complacency, which blinded them to their need to seek what one critic at the time called the "due recognition and involvement" of their black peers.

Whether or not the 1971 "Rebuttal to the Whitney Museum Exhibition" succeeded, as Andrews and his friends had hoped, in offering art historians a context for "whatsoever it is that happened this time in history concerning a group of artists identified by their Black skins," it seems true to me that the work ing a group of artists identified by their Black identity—those who, agreeing with Canaday (such as the ironies) that "black art" had to imply overtly racial subject matter, looked to create a race-conscious art in service to the broader black community, and those for whom art implied formal ambitions unconstrained by ethnicity. Sometimes this came down to something as simple as the split between figurative and abstract art that is the focus of the catalog essays in "Soul of a Nation," perhaps more than in the show itself. One might be tempted to say that the abstractionists aspired to a kind of universality, but beware: It was one of the abstractionists, Frank Bowling, who shrewdly pointed out (also in an article published in 1971, a crucial year for debate on such issues, and not coincidentally the subject of an important recent book, 1971: A Year in the Life of Color, by the art historian Darby English) that the idea of an art founded in a common black experience depended on an unfounded generalization, and that "we have not been able to detect in any kind of universal sense The Black Experience wedged-up in the flat bed between red and green." In contrast to those calling for the assertion of a proud racial identity were those who defended the singularity of the artist, who—as another of the artists in "Soul of a Nation," Raymond Saunders, had written a few years before, in a polemical exchange with the writer Ishmael Reed—"has to do for himself what is necessary for his own development, fulfilling himself as an individual."

At a theoretical level, this conflict is probably irresolvable. Since the individual can no more exist without the nurturance of others, no art can be truly race-conscious without reference to the universal. But what Canaday did so well was to make the idea that this too could be "black art"; rather, I'd try to understand why the tasks of a black critic at the time called the "due recognition and involvement" of their black peers.

T he fundamental divide among black artists at the time is simple enough to describe: It was between those who, agreeing with Canaday (such are the ironies) that "black art" had to imply overtly racial subject matter, looked to create a race-conscious art in service to the broader black community, and those for whom art implied formal ambitions unconstrained by ethnicity. Sometimes this came down to something as simple as the split between figurative and abstract art that is the focus of the catalog essays in "Soul of a Nation," perhaps more than in the show itself. One might be tempted to say that the abstractionists aspired to a kind of universality, but beware: It was one of the abstractionists, Frank Bowling, who shrewdly pointed out (also in an article published in 1971, a crucial year for debate on such issues, and not coincidentally the subject of an important recent book, 1971: A Year in the Life of Color, by the art historian Darby English) that the idea of an art founded in a common black experience depended on an unfounded generalization, and that "we have not been able to detect in any kind of universal sense The Black Experience wedged-up in the flat bed between red and green." In contrast to those calling for the assertion of a proud racial identity were those who defended the singularity of the artist, who—as another of the artists in "Soul of a Nation," Raymond Saunders, had written a few years before, in a polemical exchange with the writer Ishmael Reed—"has to do for himself what is necessary for his own development, fulfilling himself as an individual."

At a theoretical level, this conflict is probably irresolvable. Since the individual can no more exist without the nurturance...
of a group than the group can exist without the resourcefulness of the individuals who maintain it, the ultimate assertion of the superiority of one over the other will always be in vain. And yet the struggle to resolve this conflict is the very stuff of art.

Admitting my own leanings toward the abstractionist camp—some of the highlights in “Soul of a Nation,” for me, were abstract works by Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams—does not prevent me from finding many of the overtly race-centered figurative works just as impressive. I’d particularly like to have seen more from Wadsworth Jarrell and Jeff Donaldson, both of whom were part of the Chicago-based AfriCOBRA group. Immersing their imagery in vibrant patterning and (as Donaldson wrote) “Color color Color color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulations,” their art is every bit as formally driven as that of the abstractionists. Indeed, something that “Soul of a Nation” does not sufficiently show is how many artists went back and forth between abstract and representational modes. But if I had to pick a single artist to sum up what’s so inspiring about this vast exhibition—which I can’t—it would probably have to be Barkley Hendricks, a figurative painter whose work was all about “the beauty, grandeur, style of my folks,” and who scoured the old masters and modernists alike for clues on how to paint as stylishly as his subjects—which is simply to say, the people around him—dressed. His work was not about protest or propaganda; Hendricks made himself the court portraitist of everyday life.

The test of a great group show is a special kind of dissatisfaction: It makes you want to see more by the artists it includes than it can muster. Luckily, there were concurrent solo shows by some of the artists in “Soul of a Nation”—not only presenting more work but also bringing it up-to-date with more recent work. At the Museum of Modern Art, you can still see (through January 13) “Charles White: A Retrospective,” which showcases the work of one of the elders in “Soul of a Nation,” an artist whose style was rooted in the social realism of the 1930s. I find his work heavy-handed, but—mindful of the fact that he is deeply admired by artists of the caliber of David Hammons (whose early work is in “Soul of a Nation”) and Kerry James Marshall—I intend to look again more carefully.

In “Soul of a Nation,” Virginia Jaramillo is represented by a suavely seductive 1971 painting that shows nothing more than a couple of meandering red lines singing out against an uninflected green ground; the two lines somehow manage to contradict their own evident fixity on the canvas to proclaim an essential freedom of movement. As seen at the newly opened Chelsea outpost of London’s Hales Gallery in an exhibition titled “Foundations,” her new works, by contrast, have clearer, more solidly architectonic, mostly rectilinear structures, but also more variegated surfaces. I’m kind of amazed that I’ve never before seen a one-person show by Jaramillo, an artist born in 1939; this one was impressive, and I don’t intend to miss the next.

Playground, Night Washing Over

A far sunset
when we enter
isn’t done yet
when some things get
as off centre
as the swing set’s
swaying censer.

Here the landlocked
grainy colour
sandbox goes gray,
grows a duller
sunken tar. Stays
till monkey bar
shipwreck shadows
from some ago
emerge to merge
on a ripped deck
as dark surges.

The evening hours
are evening ours,
and the surf is
on every surface
strange or estranged.
Then the see-saw
is severed by shade.
There we see/saw
things made and fade
to ocean terrain—
now as though never
in motion or plain.

BRIAN WICKERS
On a blistering summer day in 1922, thousands made their way to the palatial Alhambra fortress in Spain’s Andalusian region of Granada. They took their seats in the expansive Plaza de los Aljibes and, before a sweeping view of the caves of Sacromonte, watched a parade of singers compete in the first-ever Concurso de Cante Jondo—a competition spearheaded by the poet Federico García Lorca and the composer Manuel de Falla. It was an event that cracked expressions of flamenco open, as vocalists from all over the country showcased their rawest and most ardent renditions of the folkloric tradition.

While flamenco is a blend of Moorish, Jewish, Spanish, and Roma influences, it was primarily working-class Roma communities of Andalucía that popularized the style of song, dance, and guitar-playing. But by the 1920s, watered-down versions of the sound had begun seeping into taverns, operas, and theaters. Intellectuals like Lorca and Falla feared that flamenco, which had been around for close to 150 years by then, would lose its artistic gravitas. They hoped to rekindle the genre by hosting a contest for singers who understood cante jondo (or “deep song”), one of the most solemn and respected varieties of flamenco.

The concurso generated new performers and ultimately helped create an appreciation of cante jondo that resonates today. But it also underscored the challenges that plague flamenco even now: How could artists safeguard traditions in the face of ever-changing musical landscapes? Was there a commercial path via which the genre’s authenticity could be preserved? As flamenco found mainstream recognition over the ensuing decades, these questions trailed musicians who tried to strike a balance between contemporary sounds and the rigorous musical practice. To date, no one has provided answers with as much creativity as the 25-year-old Catalan singer Rosalía.
Rosalía’s striking brand of Old and New World traditions has made her the breakout darling in Latin music, and easily one of the most compelling Spanish-language acts in recent years. Before she tore onto the scene, she had steeped herself in a grueling study of flamenco for nearly a decade. She encountered the style of music at 13 and remembers it blasting out of cars near her school—her memory illustrates how flamenco has connected with younger generations. Eager to immerse herself in the discipline, she trained with maestro José Miguel “El Chiqui” Vizcaya before earning her degree through a program at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya that accepts only one student a year. Like Lorca and Falla, Rosalía views flamenco as a very serious art form. “To learn flamenco is to swallow your pride,” she said in a recent interview with Pitchfork.

But Rosalía isn’t a purist: Rather, she’s using her rigorous training to remake flamenco in her own image, crafting a daring strain that is firmly anchored in the 21st century. Last year, she released her debut album, Los Ángeles, which leaned on acoustic compositions by guitarist Raül Refree and showed off her skills as a classic cantaoa. The songs’ structures have firm roots in flamenco, but Rosalía’s image and delivery felt refreshingly modern. She scored a Latin Grammy nomination for Best New Artist of 2017; collaborated with reggaeton’s reigning golden boy, J Balvin; and seized the attention of production maverick Pharrell Williams. El Mal Querer, her second album, became one of the most anticipated releases of 2018 in the Latin music world.

Rosalía’s bold proposition isn’t without controversy. Spanish critics have pointed out that the singer isn’t Andalusian or Romany in background, and they’ve accused her of appropriation, saying her songs don’t reflect “pure flamenco.” Rosalía has addressed the skeptics by saying she has tried to make her songs’ structures have firm roots in flamenco, but Rosalía’s image and delivery felt refreshingly modern. She scored a Latin Grammy nomination for Best New Artist of 2017; collaborated with reggaeton’s reigning golden boy, J Balvin; and seized the attention of production maverick Pharrell Williams. El Mal Querer, her second album, became one of the most anticipated releases of 2018 in the Latin music world.

The album’s story line, with its episodes of rage and sorrow and betrayal, lends itself astonishingly well to the intensity and melodrama associated with flamenco. Rosalía guides the theatrics by treating the songs like chapters. “Malamente” (“Badly”), for example, is also titled “Capítulo 1: Augurio,” or “Chapter 1: Omen.” The eerie, slightly off-kilter slice of deconstructed R&B opens the album with a premonition of how things will end in this story. Rosalía sings cryptically about stepping out alone into a strange, gloomy night, and it’s unclear where she is going until she declares, in the song’s final seconds, “I won’t waste another minute thinking about you again.” The track is a portrait of a woman who is running away from something “bad, very bad, very bad”—and fast.

In a sudden, almost disorienting turn, the next track—“Que No Salga la Luna” (“Don’t Let the Moon Rise”)—bursts awake with a flurry of guitars and shifts the scene to an ornate wedding. Rosalía sings from the perspective of a groom who giddily admires his new bride: “What luck I had the day I found her.” A bulería form, one of flamenco’s fast rhythmic structures, makes the tempo vigorous and celebratory. Yet something foreboding lurks in the melody. In a background vocal, Rosalía begs someone—anyone, perhaps the listener—to object to the marriage. No one does.

The production helps fuse past and present, but it is Rosalía’s voice that ultimately does the heavy lifting. Her breathy harmonies wind through the music smoothly, yet her belting power carries forceful cante jondo songs. The album’s narrative arc is taken from Flamenca, a 13th-century, 8,095-line poem written in Occitan, one of Europe’s earliest Romance languages. In the text, a young woman is married off to a medieval lord in an extravagant, eight-day celebration. However, all-consuming jealousy overtakes the man, and he soon locks his wife in a tower, where he can keep a watchful eye on her.

That sense of “here and now” is all over El Mal Querer, an ambitious, atmospheric concept album that dropped earlier this month and sees Rosalía mining trap, R&B, and neo-soul for minimal bass lines, shadowy beats, and the occasional dip into Auto-Tune. Some of the artist’s urge to dive into new genres was the result of Rosalía’s collaboration with El Guincho, an electronic producer from Spain who has worked with Icelandic pop icon Björk, among others. But while there are sparse synths and quiet loops, doled out carefully across the album, the foundation of each song is still flamenco: The percussion of nearly every track is built on palmas, flamenco’s essential style of handclapping.

The groom’s descent into madness begins on “Pienso en Tu Mirá” (“I Think About the Look in Your Eyes”), which is already among Rosalía’s most popular releases, having garnered over 20 million views on YouTube since July. The nimble pop anthem is punctuated by handclaps and chants from Madrid’s all-girl choir Milagros, whose upbeat, bouncy refrains provide a sharp contrast to the grim lyrics. “I dread when you go out / Smiling across the street / Because everyone can see,” Rosalía sings, marking the point at which the groom of El Mal Querer gives into destructive suspicions. As the female voices come together to chirp, “I think of your gaze, your gaze, like a bullet in the chest,” the track becomes an arresting meditation on the toxicity of the male gaze as such. The unsettling message embedded in the sing-songy chorus exemplifies Rosalía’s ability to subvert the expectations of pop music.

At its core, El Mal Querer is an album dedicated to female agency, and Rosalía turns her focus to the woman suffering at the story’s center. “People passing by looked at her, but didn’t see her, alone in hell,” she sings on “Bagdad,” the haunting centerpiece of the album. Rosalía’s quavering vocal line is heartbreakingly high, illustrating the controlled melisma techniques of her flamenco training, as the sparse beat toys with the nostalgia of the early 2000s. The chorus interpolates Justin Timberlake’s “Cry Me a River,” and Rosalía gives it a futuristic twist by distorting her vocals.

The song is one of the clearest examples of how Rosalía pulls from the pop era she grew up in and the early days of flamenco, drawing from both worlds to create something that is new, forward-thinking, and emotionally stirring.

The last track on the album, “A Ningún Hombre” (“No Man”), is one final, formidable declaration of defiance. Through warbling Auto-Tune, Rosalía sings: “I’m going to tattoo the first letter of your name, because it is also mine, to remember what you once did.” The curtain closes, and a woman’s chilling promise to flourish while never forgetting the pain she’s endured becomes Rosalía’s last word. The song serves as a powerful reminder of Rosalía’s strength and autonomy as an artist, qualities that have positioned her to do more than just write an experimental chapter in flamenco’s history.

With El Mal Querer, Rosalía pulls off an act of musical reinvention that’s nothing short of radical.
Puzzle No. 3485
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

1 Article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung pertaining to French population decline (3-3)
4 Fish beginning to drink liquor? That can make a loud noise (4,4)
10 In pursuit of change, God and I are able to accommodate comparatively ineffectual Nicaraguan, for instance (7,8)
11 Puzzles about public transportation (7)
12 Extend final helping of seasoned stew (4,3)
13 Peg left after being once called “Republican loser” (4-2-4)
15 Opposed to Tina’s transformation (4)
18 Placed call in return (4)
20 Where scientists study utterances such as “arf”? (10)
23 Take money off the top, and request something useful during a bank robbery (3,4)
24 Schemer pushed back, getting around chief (7)
25 Outspoken conservatives dismiss half the females among children, creating the trigger for a historic scandal (3,4,2,6)
26 Send lascivious-sounding music as a finale (8)

DOWN

1 Conclusion of summit engulfed by ironclad maneuvering having to do with principles of faith (9)
2 Elevate Ben and Leon in a chaotic meeting (7)
3 West of Fiji, I live where it’s comfortably warm (8)
5 Supply a pickle and bagel to resident of the South (9)
6 Current master is deranged (6)
7 No! Orange County vehicle flipped wild animal (7)
8 New York museum takes on painter (5)
9 Local psychologist circling mountains (4)
14 Seven-day requirement sounds not very heroic (4-5)
15 Talk up a character in Euripides for each musician (8)
19 Here in Quebec, a notable lake is cold (7)
21 Largeness of body and mind involves rest (7)
22 Note reversal of secular beauty treatment (6)
23 Strangely, UPS stores alien configuration (5)
24 Strain one’s back and foot (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3484

**ACROSS**

1 SEVILLE (anag.)
2 STAN + DUPE| 9 MAIR + COP + OLIO (anag.) 10 MAVERICK (rev.)
11 SPECK (anag.)
12 STEELE|ERS 14 OP + TING[e] + IN
15 ang. 19 [e] EAR-W + AX
20 SKIT + TLEN (anag.) 22 SPECTRUM
24 G + ONE 27 A + TAR + I
28 A + LIENATED (anag. rev.)
29 E + YEW + ASH 10 GROANER

**DOWN**

1 SLOPE|FOE (anag. rev.)
2 VER) + MONSTER (term anag.)
3 [GLAJO & 4] ILOGISTIC (anag. anag.)
5 SHOWER (anag.) 7 DO|VER
8 hidden 13 ANT-(AR)-TIC[k] + A
16 ang. 17 SU (rev.) + SPENDER
18 SKEMPING 21 BREATHE
23 PI|FACE 25 2 def.

EYE+WASH + GROANER

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