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Prisons are at the center of a privatization bonanza—and private-equity companies are playing an outsize role.

TIM REQUARTH
Letters

Action Plans for Democracy

In “Needed: More Democracy” [April 22], John Nichols talks of many things that are required to “bring full democracy to the United States.” Perhaps he should start smaller—like the highly undemocratic Democratic Party.

As far back as Henry Wallace, this party has usurped the will of the people time and time again. The party’s behavior in 2016, when it cheated Senator Bernie Sanders, was right in line with its history of strong-arm tactics.

Real reform should start there. The Democratic Party elites lost the 2016 election to a buffoon, offering us a candidate who showed little concern for the needs of the people. The superdelegates of the party are a slap in the face of the rank and file. The entrenched powers in the Democratic Party leadership must go; otherwise, there is no chance for reform of the party, much less of America’s (alleged) democracy.

JOSEPH BAUERS
CHAMPAIGN, ILL.

Spreading Hope—and Justice

I was struck by the parallels in two articles in the April 22 issue: Martin Garbus’s “What I Saw at an Immigrant-Detention Center” and Lauren Gill’s “Fighting for Life on Death Row.” Both are gripping, honest stories of people close to despair. How can this be America? Women and children who are seeking asylum put into cages. Men, facing death, in cages for years and years.

The detention centers are appalling, as are their horrid profit-making goals. But reading about Project Hope in Gill’s article was a moving, inspiring reflection of the resilience of this group in facing trauma. The United States is in desperate need of a countrywide Project Hope.

MARY ANN HANNO
WEST YARMOUTH, MASS.

John Nichols notes that “we must make the structural reforms that will bring full democracy to the United States” if we are to achieve major progressive goals like the Green New Deal, Medicare for All, an increased federal minimum wage, and tuition-free college. To that end, Nichols cites a number of such measures—the For the People Act, abolition of the Electoral College, full voting representation for US districts and territories.

These “more democracy” measures would indeed make it easier for Americans to elect a progressive Congress and president. However, none of them address the inconvenient reality that any legislation passed by a progressive Congress and president could survive only to the extent that it did not infringe on the putative rights of corporations and other artificial entities, which the Constitution does not enumerate but which contemporary judicial theory has created.

Given the current makeup of the Supreme Court, that theory will not be going anywhere on its own for the foreseeable future.

In this context, Nichols might also have mentioned Representative Pramila Jayapal’s HJ Res. 48, which would amend the Constitution to specify that the constitutional rights of natural persons do not apply to artificial entities and, furthermore, that First Amendment protections do not apply to political campaign spending. The Nation’s readers should be aware that a specific legislative vehicle exists to solve these fundamental flaws in our democracy and that they can easily demand their representatives’ support for this vital reform.

ULYSSES LATEINER
SOMERVILLE, MASS.
Impeach Trump?

Far from the “complete and total exoneration” claimed by Donald Trump, the 448-page report by special counsel Robert Mueller paints a scathing portrait of a lawless president. The report finds “substantial evidence” that Trump obstructed the investigation and invites Congress to consider how to hold him accountable. The question now is how Congress should respond.

The report details much of what we already knew, including that the Russians did interfere in the 2016 election. But contrary to many liberals’ expectations, the Mueller probe did not find that Trump or his campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government. Even so, when the investigation into Russian interference began, the president clearly sought to discredit, impede, and obstruct it. In the words of the report, Trump launched “public attacks on the investigation, non-public efforts to control it, and efforts in both public and private to encourage witnesses not to cooperate with the investigation.” The president’s efforts were limited only by his incompetence and the common sense of those aides who refused to follow Trump’s orders to trample the law, choosing instead to ignore his “crazy shit,” as then-White House counsel Donald McGahn phrased it.

Mueller’s report is widely being viewed as an impeachment referral. Indeed, some of the best and brightest progressive leaders in Congress have called for initiating impeachment hearings. Senator Elizabeth Warren was the first of the presidential contenders to do so. Insurgent new congressional stars like Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are pushing an impeachment resolution introduced by Tlaib. Grassroots groups like Indivisible and powerful donors like billionaire Tom Steyer are demanding impeachment hearings as well.

But House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and others in the Democratic leadership are more circumspect. They have not ruled out impeachment but rather argue that the House should take that step only if Trump’s misdeeds are, as Pelosi has put it, “compelling and overwhelming.” She has also noted that “the facts regarding holding the president accountable can be gained outside of impeachment hearings” and that Republican support would be essential for impeachment to have any chance of resulting in a conviction in the Senate.

The question of whether or not to impeach is hotly debated in the broader progressive community, including at this magazine. Democrats face political risks in either direction. Failing to impeach Trump could demoralize the very activists and base voters that the Democrats need for a large turnout in 2020. But impeachment on the basis of Trump’s unsuccessful efforts to obstruct an investigation into a conspiracy that never happened could run aground—and generate a backlash that would hurt Democrats next year. It might be wiser for the party to move on from what has come to be known as Russiagate. For over two years, too many liberal voices and Democratic politicians have been focused almost monomanically on the 2016 election and Russia’s involvement in it. Pumped up by the media, many Democrats inflated Russiagate into an attack on our country akin to 9/11 or Pearl Harbor, often overshadowing the reality of Trump’s blunders: his turnover of the government to entrenched interests who are rigging the rules against working people, even as he fans racist and nativist fears to distract from their plunder.

Democrats clearly have a responsibility to take up Mueller’s invitation to investigate, particularly given the disgraceful performance of Attorney General William Barr, whose efforts to cover for Trump may win him applause in the White House but will surely earn him disrepute in the history books. The House Judiciary Committee is right to demand access to Mueller’s full, unredacted report and underlying evidence and to hear testimony directly from Mueller himself on the conclusions that his investigation...
May 13, 2019

Cold War on Cuba

New sanctions are aimed at Cuban and US citizens.

In the early hours of April 17, 1961, a CIA operative placed a beacon on the beach known as Playa Girón, to literally light the path for a paramilitary assault on Cuba. The infamous Bay of Pigs invasion has become an enduring symbol of US aggression against the then-fledgling Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro. For Cubans, Playa Girón remains a proud symbol of their David-versus-Goliath triumph over the Colossus of the North. For imperially minded US policy-makers and a diminishing but still politically powerful generation of hard-line Cuban exiles, the defeated invasion remains a symbol of unfinished business.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the imperious administration of Donald Trump chose the 58th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs to launch a round of US aggression against Cuba. On April 17, the State Department announced that it would, for the first time, implement a section of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act that opens the door to tens of thousands of lawsuits against international companies doing business in Cuba, in an effort to deter much-needed foreign investment on the island. The same day, National Security Adviser John Bolton traveled to Coral Gables, Florida, outside Miami, to speak at a commemorative luncheon of the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association, where he denounced “the disastrous Obama-era policies of peaceful coexistence and promised to ‘finally end the glamorization of socialism and communism’ by levying new sanctions against Cuba.

Those sanctions will be aimed not at the Cuban military or government but at the Cuban people and US citizens. The Trump administration will cap remittances—even imposed by the Cuban people.”

“We condemn these newest attacks on Cuba and the freedom to travel of the American people,” said the leaders of Marazul Tours, the veteran Cuba travel company, who noted that Bolton’s threat to “restrict” non-Cuban-American travel remained vague. Indeed, not only are the constitutional rights of US citizens to travel in potential jeopardy, but so are the livelihoods of thousands of self-employed Cuban entrepreneurs and small businesses that cater to US travelers and survive on the economic support that such veiled tourism” provides to Cuba’s growing private sector.

“Since the US re-established diplomatic ties with Cuba, thousands of Americans, including many families from my own community, have visited, and numerous businesses have explored new markets,” Representative Kathy Castor (D-FL) pointed out. “These activities have not only opened new economic opportunities for Americans and Cubans alike; they serve as an integral part of our efforts to promote the spread of democracy and ensure the security of our region.” Unfortunately, she concluded, “the Trump administration has once again doubled down on its return to Cold War policies that have failed for the past 60 years and have done nothing to help the Cuban people.”

But the administration’s regression takes US policy (continued on page 8)
$5 Trillion Questions

The debate over expanding Medicare is at the center of the fight for the Democratic presidential nomination. Yet for such a crucial topic, there are still two questions that advocates—especially those championing Medicare for All—have yet to properly answer.

The first is how to take on the medical establishment and pay doctors less. Medicare for All would eliminate greedy and needless insurance companies, which will fight to the bitter end to keep making their fat profits. But even that battle pales in comparison with taking on the doctors, hospitals, and providers who charge private insurance higher prices for medical services. To understand this, consider where Medicare for All would get its savings. Proponents argue that Medicare for All would increase government spending but reduce overall spending on health care. That’s true; over the course of 10 years, Medicare for All could save $2 trillion. But only about 20 percent of those savings would come from eliminating insurance companies, while another 10 percent would come from cost controls on prescription drugs. The remaining 70 percent would come from cutting rates for medical providers. Without those cuts, health-care spending could increase more than $3 trillion under Medicare for All. That’s a $5 trillion swing, all determined by the question of how to tackle the medical establishment.

During a campaign, there’s good reason to focus on the insurance industry first; it’s the thing that most people absolutely hate about our broken health-care system. But if the campaign fails to make the case that the prices charged by medical providers are too high, then the politics could shift against Medicare for All once the doctors start complaining. The medical establishment will insist that hospitals will close, especially in poorer areas, and without a set of responses in place, that argument could imperil the push for health-care reform. The political instinct will be to buy off the medical establishment, even as that increases the cost of the proposal. When Aneurin Bevan, the architect of Britain’s National Health Service, was asked how he overcame the initial resistance of doctors, he replied that he “stuffed their mouths with gold.” Today, that would involve maintaining the current high rates seen in private-insurance payments. And even then, when President Harry Truman tried to emphasize how much better off American doctors would be under his universal plan in 1945, they waged what was then the most expensive lobbying campaign in history to defeat it.

If the answer to the first question is to keep paying doctors inflated rates, then the answer to the second question—who will bear the new taxes?—becomes even more important. While overall spending on health care would go down if we spent less on doctors, government spending would still go up. If poorly designed, Medicare for All could place the tax burden on Medicaid recipients (by imposing payroll taxes when they already have low-cost government insurance), professional and unionized workers (who would see their high-end health care disappear), and blue states (if what they currently spend on expanded Medicaid is swept into the baseline for Medicare for All). Meanwhile, the plan could most benefit the elderly, who would get even better Medicare while paying nothing extra, and red states that have kept their public health-care spending low. The first group is the base for the left, the second for Trump. That means if we don’t think through this tax question, it could be difficult to hold a political coalition together.

The Bernie Sanders campaign has released a list of potential financing options to start the debate over the tax burden—but this is only a start. The sticker shock of the initial taxes is the thing that will most likely kill public enthusiasm for a single-payer system. If it’s left unanswered, the question of who would bear the brunt of those new taxes will be determined by the proposal’s enemies.

These two questions need to be resolved before we start seeing the path to sweeping reform. Building arguments and analyses along these lines will help us figure out what kind of coalition we can form to expand health care to everyone. The momentum is growing, but with that progress comes the need to answer the $5 trillion questions.

Mike Konczal
VOLKSWAGEN

Driving Blind in Xinjiang?

Most people react with some mix of shock, horror, and outrage upon learning that China has detained an estimated 1.5 million Uighurs in internment camps in the Xinjiang region. Volkswagen CEO Herbert Diess, however, hardly reacted at all. When asked by the BBC’s Shanghai correspondent, Robin Brant, if he was proud to associate with what China was doing to the Uighur people, he mustered a peevish “I can’t judge this, sorry…. I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

That, of course, is almost definitely a lie. Volkswagen helped build a plant in Xinjiang that employs hundreds of people, and the company has been manufacturing cars in China for more than 30 years. In 2012, news about the opening of the Xinjiang plant explicitly noted the strained relationship between the area’s Uighur population and the Chinese government. If what Diess said is true—if he really doesn’t know about China’s oppression of the Uighur minority—then it’s a gross dereliction of his responsibilities as CEO.

Of all companies, Volkswagen should know better. The company was founded by the Nazi government of Germany in 1937 and used forced labor from concentration camps. A former CEO faces prison time for faking emissions-test results—a scandal that broke in 2015. More recently, Diess had to apologize for echoing a Nazi slogan.

It is clear that Volkswagen has not learned enough from its past and that the company is dangerously noncommittal about a cultural genocide occurring in a place where it operates.

—Liz Boyd

Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren is running a presidential campaign unlike any we’ve seen before, and our media have no idea how to handle it. It’s a campaign not merely of ideas but of detailed policy proposals dealing with a host of ills that other politicians have ignored or tried to wish away. Yet The Washington Post compared her plans to the silly “booklet of policy ideas” issued by Jeb Bush before he flamed out in the 2016 Republican presidential race. Politico, for some reason, thought it worthwhile to get Steve Bannon’s views. (“You’re not going to beat Trump with policies,” Bannon said.) And New York Times columnist Bret Stephens actually called this meticulously prepared and intellectually challenging thinker a “Trumpian of the Left.”

In reality, her proposals address many of the phenomena undermining the nation’s republican values and commitment to equal opportunity. All appear to be based on consultations with progressive activists cognizant of the politics, as well as policy experts hip to the technical complexities. Without exception, her plans are bold, and in many cases they’re truly visionary. As with her call for Trump’s impeachment, made after she read Robert Mueller’s report from cover to cover, their successful implementation would require a sea change in the way politics is conducted in this country. But unlike every other candidate in the race—or in recent US history—Warren is providing a detailed road map for where she wants to take the country. With plans like her proposal to eliminate most college debt, she is revealing the values and commitments that she hopes will take the United States to what Robert Kennedy called “a newer world.”

I am competent to judge the efficacy of just a handful of her plans. And with our sclerotic political system and the influence that the super-rich enjoy in it, I have my doubts about one day seeing, say, a 2 percent wealth tax on households with a net worth of $50 million to $1 billion and an additional 1 percent tax on net worth above $1 billion. I don’t know how you reduce the Pentagon’s budget when its spending is spread across so many congressional districts and when so many defense contractors put money in the pockets of so many members of Congress. And I’d be amazed to see those members forbid themselves to own stocks or exploit lobbying opportunities after they leave office. But is Warren’s proposal for the federal manufacture of generic drugs the right one? Is her plan for postal banking ideal, given all the options? I couldn’t say. My guess, though, is that they are. She gives every evidence of having done her homework.

The proposals I can judge, however, are mighty impressive. My favorite is her plan to break up the big tech companies—specifically, Google, Amazon, and Facebook—which she laid out in a 1,700-word article on Medium. She defines the problem as follows: “Today’s big tech companies have too much power…over our economy, our society, and our democracy. They’ve bulldozed competition, used our private information for profit, and tilted the playing field against everyone else. And in the process, they have hurt small businesses and stifled innovation.” She notes that “weak antitrust enforcement has led to a dramatic reduction in competition and innovation in the tech sector” and that these companies don’t have to worry about protecting people’s privacy or policing the lies and incitements to violence that appear so frequently on their sites. What’s more, they tend to “bully cities and states into showering them with massive taxpayer handouts in exchange for doing business, and can act, in the words of Mark Zuckerberg, ‘more like a government than a traditional company.’” In calling for the breakup of these companies, Warren says it would be in keeping with America’s long trust-busting tradition, especially during the previous Gilded Age.

She proposes legislation to forbid what she calls massive “platform utilities”—those with annual global revenue over $25 billion—from owning any participant on their respective platforms. They would also be prohibited from discriminating against users or sharing data with third parties. Smaller companies would have to meet the same “standard of
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fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory dealing with users” but would not need to be split apart from the participant assets they own. And to make sure this got done, she would empower federal regulators, state attorneys general, and injured private parties to sue any platform utility found to be in violation. It could also cost them a fine of 5 percent of annual revenue.

In addition, Warren says her administration would reverse the “illegal and anti-competitive tech mergers” allowed under Trump and previous administrations in order to “help America’s content creators—from local newspapers and national magazines to comedians and musicians—keep more of the value their content generates, rather than seeing it scooped up by companies like Google and Facebook.”

One cannot say for certain whether her ideas about tech monopolies will be the best ones put forward by a candidate, since in most cases, they are currently the only ones to have been put forward by a candidate. The problem may be that her competitors are afraid to take on the very corporations that enable them to communicate with voters—and can therefore punish them for it. Or it may be that the other candidates feel that the media tend to focus exclusively on personality, horse-race-style measurements like fund-raising and early, largely meaningless poll results, and that elusive phantom of likability.

Fine. How candidates want to run their campaigns is their business. But at the very least, it should be the press’s business to ask them to respond to Warren’s policies and proposals. Add that to the list of the media’s failures to ensure that this time, voters are able to make informed decisions about who and what they’re getting when they pull the lever to take back our country and restore our republic.

At the very least, it should be the business of the press to ask the other candidates to respond to Warren’s policies and proposals.

(continued from page 4)

much farther back in history than the Cold War. “Today,” Bolton asserted, “we proudly proclaim for all to hear: The Monroe Doctrine is alive and well.” The doctrine, enunciated by President James Monroe in 1823, designated the Western Hemisphere as the dominion of the United States and warned European powers to stay away. For well over 100 years, Washington repeatedly invoked the doctrine to justify gunboat diplomacy against and protracted military occupations of nations like Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, Haiti, and Cuba. By invoking it now, the Trump administration appears to be setting the stage for escalating US interventions.

“Cuba will be next,” Bolton declared in April, after predicting that the embattled government of Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro would soon collapse under the weight of US sanctions. “Together,” he told the cheering audience of aging Bay of Pigs vets, who paid $100 a plate to hear him speak, “we can finish what began on those beaches, on those famous days in April, 58 years ago today.”

In a forceful reaction, Cuban officials reminded the world of the realities of history: On those beaches, Cuban militias defeated the CIA-led brigade in less than 72 hours. “Aggressive escalation of #US against #Cuba will fail,” Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez responded via Twitter. “As in Girón, we shall overcome.”

Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at the National Security Archive, writes frequently on Cuba for The Nation.
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Illustrating the Danger

Electronic monitoring is popularly hailed as more liberating than jail. But as New York Times columnist Michelle Alexander writes, it is also a blatant manifestation of “the newest” Jim Crow, or the systemic oppression of African Americans through the criminal-justice system. Under e-carceration, limits on mobility “may make it difficult or impossible to get or keep a job, attend school, care for your kids or visit family members. You’re effectively sentenced to an open-air digital prison, one that may not extend beyond your house, your block or your neighborhood,” she writes. That concern is immeasurably amplified when the technology is designed to do more than mere geolocation.

In 2014, Prison Legal News reported on GPS ankle monitors that were equipped with cell-phone features that let police, prosecutors, or prison supervisors monitor the conversations of pretrial defendants and parolees without their knowledge or consent. When a defense attorney noticed authorities could talk to his client through an ankle bracelet, he filed a complaint, noting that SecureAlert, the company that manufactures the device, could unilaterally activate the microphones without notice. His client’s device was temporarily removed for the duration of the trial, but it remains unclear how many of the approximately 125,000 devices worn by those on supervised release in the United States are also equipped with eavesdropping capabilities.

Now it turns out that the ankle bracelets worn by juvenile offenders and pretrial defendants in Chicago have been equipped with microphones that permit social services, probation officers, and other government agencies to make unscheduled calls and send push notifications concerning their wearers’ whereabouts. Most alarmingly, the devices allow authorities to listen in on conversations, including interactions with parents, teachers, psychologists, or peers in the bedroom, in the bathroom, or during consultation in an attorney’s office. The monitors confound the obligation of confidentiality with lawyers, therapists, and other fiduciaries. They turn the constitutional right against self-incrimination on its head. Wiretapping children helps the state monitor their entire social world, exposing intimate personal lives far beyond the criminal-justice system’s jurisdiction.

These days, many of us imprison ourselves with analogous technology by choice—the smart watches we wear on our wrists, the GPS tracking on our cell phones or car-location apps, the mellifluous reassurances of Siri. These aren’t perceived as disciplinary tools; instead, they are marketed as ways to connect. Take the ads on Amazon for wearable child trackers that promise constant oversight of one’s progeny: all smiles and pastel colors, not a hint of dystopia. And while this sort of thing could well be handy for lost dogs, Alzheimer’s patients, or those with disabilities, perpetual radio contact also introduces a control-freaky, dependency-inducing moral tether into parent-child relations.

Verizon’s GizmoWatch, a tracker with an LTE smart watch built around it, is a good example. According to one breathless review on the website Wearable, the “smartwatch stuff” does double duty by priming youngsters for long-term patterns of consumption, in that it “is actually getting kids used to the idea of wearing a smartwatch.” Plus, there’s a Mickey Mouse edition, a built-in step counter, inactivity reminders, and a “hopscotch tracker and a voice changing mode to make things a little more fun.”

More to the point, the GizmoWatch has two-way calling and messaging and can be programmed with up to 10 contacts approved by parents, with location tracking and GPS fences that parents can delimit.

Similarly, a platform called Canvas Parent advertises itself as empowering parents “to take a greater role in overseeing their children’s academic work.” The app maker pitches it as “a convenient communication channel for schools and parents,” promising to let parents “view assignment descriptions, assignment grades, course grades and course announcements, as well as set reminders for assignments and alerts for specific grade activity.”

Congrats, Steve!
While advertised as enhancing transparency, the app burdens children by perpetually measuring their performance, complete with multiple daily push notifications of what must be done and done now. It’s sold in the name of educating children, but in practice, it teaches parents not just how to participate but also to intrude by providing little space for kids to learn anything for or by themselves.

Someplace between digital prisons and digital playpens are the apps, cameras, and microphones that govern us all. Insurers ask how much you exercise, employers monitor how long you take for lunch, and Amazon even patented wristbands that could tell if workers “were about to place items in the wrong bins.” Some of these systems require employees to download trackers onto their personal phones. The social cost of 24/7 surveillance, then, is not merely the mechanization of our duties at work; it makes us uncreative robots in the process, forming us into obedient soldiers.

Scholars Woodrow Hartzog and Evan Selinger recently underscored the simple human importance of obscurity—that is, being able to move relatively unnoticed in the world, even through public spaces. Despite the too-easy bromide of “I have nothing to hide,” our mental and constitutional health requires a degree of protected thought-space in order for us to become self-reflective, responsible, and aware. A precious species of whimsy and personal satisfaction flourishes only when we are not constantly under a spotlight. The shelter of obscurity, Hartzog and Selinger remind us, operates as a “barrier that can shield you from government, corporate and social snoops.” Without that most basic allowance of autonomy, we will have capitulated to a civic practice of nothing less than totalitarianism.

**WILLIAM BARR’S HANDLING OF THE MUELLER REPORT**

He had the résumé and name
For which such DC lawyers strive.
The headline of his life has changed.
It’s “William Barr; He Took a Dive.”
Prisons are at the center of a privatization bonanza—and private-equity companies are playing an outsized role.

TIM REQUARTH
WHEN THE BELLAMY CREEK CORRECTIONAL FACILITY’S LONGTIME KITCHEN OFFICER DECIDED TO LEAVE IN 2014, DAVID ANGEL REQUESTED THE POSITION. ANGEL, WHO WAS NEARING RETIREMENT, HAD WORKED AT PRISONS ALL OVER MICHIGAN, INCLUDING STINTS AT THREE MAXIMUM-SECURITY FACILITIES. “I WANTED A PERMANENT POSITION FOR MY LAST FEW YEARS IN THE DEPARTMENT. I HAD A LOT OF RESPECT AMONG THE PRISONER AND OFFICER STAFF, AND I THOUGHT I COULD DO THE JOB AND KEEP PEOPLE SAFE,” HE SAID. “UM… I WAS WRONG.”

The Bellamy Creek kitchen is typical for a Michigan prison. Sixty incarcerated men staff it, doing everything from slicing potatoes with tethered knives to working the dish tank. Angel’s job was to provide security while six or seven outside employees oversaw the operations. The employees were new hires by Aramark, a food-service company recently contracted by the state to run its prison kitchens.

“It was a constant daily struggle,” Angel recalled. At first, it was the little things: Food was spilled but never cleaned up. Meals were served late, or the kitchen would run out of food and the staff would have to swap ingredients. “I saw peanut butter substituted for a hamburger patty more times than I care to count.”

Then came the day that he noticed spoiled bananas being unloaded from the supplier’s truck. He told the driver to take the bananas back but was refused. That day, he decided to wheel the bananas over to a dumpster. But trucks kept arriving with more bad food: “I threw out 700 pounds of rotten potatoes once.” Nevertheless, the spoiled food made its way into the kitchen, or fresh food would become spoiled because of Aramark’s poor storage practices, Angel said. He grew concerned about the safety of the food. “That’s when I saw maggots under the big commercial mixer.” So he alerted his supervisor.

Angel laid the blame squarely on Aramark, and he wasn’t alone. Michigan’s switch to a privatized prison-food system was supposed to save the state money—$16 million, or more than 20 percent of what Michigan had been paying to feed the 44,000 people held in its prisons. But in order to make the numbers work, Aramark’s three-year, $145 million contract required the company to slash costs to an average of $1.29 per meal. One of the ways large companies like Aramark can do this is by taking advantage of economies of scale to get better prices on ingredients; they can also reduce quantities and serve lower-quality, less nutritious food. Probably the most effective way is to slash the payroll. In Michigan, unionized corrections workers earned $15 to $25 an hour, but the Aramark employees who replaced them were paid as little as $11 an hour.

As the months passed, reports like Angel’s were being made at prisons around the state. At the G. Robert Cotton facility, a prisoner spotted maggots on a vegetable slicer. At a neighboring facility, 30 people fell ill with foodborne illness after fly larvae were found crawling around the food-service line. At a prison farther north, an Aramark employee was caught serving meatballs fished out of a trash can. The state fined Aramark $200,000 for unsanitary food preparation, substituting nutritionally inferior ingredients, and routinely shorting prisoners on calories. In 2014, protests erupted throughout the state.

Michigan and Aramark terminated their contract a year and a half early, but prisoners and guards had little reason to celebrate, because the state quietly replaced Aramark with another prison-food giant, Trinity Food Services. The problems continued under Trinity, and by 2016, a second round of protests had erupted. Most of these were peaceful, but one, in the Upper Peninsula facility of Kinross, led to what the state Department of Corrections finally acknowledged was Michigan’s first prison riot since 1981. No one was seriously hurt, but it cost the state nearly $1 million in damage. “It was a powder keg,” Angel said.

“This [situation] has created an environment of theft, extortion, and robbery—all in the name of survival,” said Ramone Wilson, who is imprisoned at the Cotton facility. “If you’re on an empty stomach, then you’re desperate.”

These days, Michigan’s for-profit prison-food experiment has few vocal fans. But it’s hardly an aberration; rather, it is just one of the most flagrant examples of private companies taking over core services in the United States’ publicly operated jails and prisons. Hadar Aviram, a legal scholar, calls this phenomenon “piecemeal privatization.” She warns that, while the problems with privately operated prisons have been well documented, “focusing on private-prison companies misses the fact that public correctional institutions are... essentially privatized.”

—Hadar Aviram

Rotten in the state of Michigan: A worker prepares a meal tray at the Charles Egeler Reception and Guidance Center in Jackson, Michigan.

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Rotten in the state of Michigan: A worker prepares a meal tray at the Charles Egeler Reception and Guidance Center in Jackson, Michigan.

These days, Michigan’s for-profit prison-food experiment has few vocal fans. But it’s hardly an aberration; rather, it is just one of the most flagrant examples of private companies taking over core services in the United States’ publicly operated jails and prisons. Hadar Aviram, a legal scholar, calls this phenomenon “piecemeal privatization.” She warns that, while the problems with privately operated prisons have been well documented, “focusing on private-prison companies misses the fact that public correctional institutions are also, essentially, privatized.” Fully private prisons hold less than a tenth of the 2.3 million people incarcerated in America. Privatized services, by contrast, affect nearly everyone in the system.

Because of this reach, the market for privatized services dwarfs that of privatized facilities. The private-prison in-
Industry’s annual revenues total $14 billion. By comparison, the correctional food-service industry alone amounts to the equivalent of $4 billion worth of food each year, according to Technomic. Corrections departments spend about $12.3 billion on health care, about half of which is provided by private companies. Telephone companies, which can charge up to $25 for a 15-minute call, rake in $1.3 billion annually. The range of for-profit services is extensive, from transport vans to halfway houses, from video visitations to e-mail, from ankle monitors to care packages. To many companies, the $80 billion that the United States spends on corrections each year is not a national embarrassment but a gold mine.

Today, a handful of privately held companies dominate the correctional-services market, many with troubling records of price gouging some of the poorest families and violating the human rights of prisoners. But the problem doesn’t end there. These companies are often controlled by private-equity firms, which through financial alchemy transform the prison-industrial complex into lavish returns for pensions, endowments, and charitable foundations. And as successive administrations have ramped up immigration enforcement, there’s also been money to be made in immigrant detention.

Bianca Tylek, the founder of Worth Rises, an advocacy group that tracks commercial interests in corrections, has catalogued 3,100 companies with a financial stake in mass incarceration. Her findings were released last April in a Corrections Accountability Project report and include not only the well-known, publicly traded private-prison contractors but also divisions within companies with household names like Amazon, General Electric, and Stanley Black & Decker. In addition, dozens of boutique firms are dipping deep into the corrections-industry well, from Wall Street Prison Consultants, which provides advice to white-collar offenders, to a lawn-mower service that sells only to prisons. “We’ve underestimated the size of the prison-industrial complex,” Tylek said. “Every estimate you’ve seen until now is a conservative one.”

Or as Alex Friedmann, associate director of the Human Rights Defense Center and managing editor at Prison Legal News, put it, “Pretty much every conceivable service in the public prison system has been privatized in one form or another, with the exception of putting people to death.”

Friedmann has good reason to know. He spent 10 years in Tennessee’s prisons and jails, and in 1990, when his sentence began, most services were still run in-house. But privatization was on the horizon. At the time, he was optimistic about company-run services; the state-run prison system didn’t exactly have a stellar reputation. “I was in favor of privatization,” he said. “The big draw was rumors of free cold soft drinks in the chow hall. If you’re locked up, the amenities of life are pretty few, so that’s remarkable.” Two years later, he was sent to Tennessee’s South Central Correctional Facility, run by the corporation CCA (now CoreCivic). Once he arrived, he said, “I figured it out. Soft drinks are just sugar syrup and water, and thus cheap,” allowing private companies, he speculated, to meet state caloric requirements at little cost. Over his six years at South Central, he realized the for-profit companies had somehow made prison life worse.

Friedmann, then 23 years old, intuited a wave of privatization on the horizon, so he reached out to Prison Legal News and asked if he could write about it. One of his first articles, published in 1997, tells the story of six incarcerated men “roasted alive” in a privately operated prison transport van in Florida. “Ironically,” he wrote, “there are more regulatory guidelines for shipping cattle or other commodities across state lines than for extraditing prisoners.”

The next year, he started his own newsletter, Private Corrections Industry News Bulletin, to keep track of privatization trends across the country. His neatly typeset bulletin was prescient. In 1990, Tennessee was just flirting with privatization. By 2016, over a quarter of the state’s 22,000 prisoners were housed in private prisons. All health care at public facilities is contracted out, at a cost of $95 million per year. Phone services, e-mails, and money transfers are all private. Food service is private. Even the transport vans are private. For misdemeanors, probation supervision is privatized, with the company’s fees paid by offenders.

Today, Friedmann is a leading advocate against privatized prisons and prison services. He has a salt-and-pepper beard and wire-rimmed glasses and speaks with the practiced precision of a high-school history teacher who has given the same lecture for two dozen years—which, in a sense, he has, warning of a privatization bonanza that has only recently gained the mainstream media’s attention.

Consider prison transport. He first investigated the subject in 1997 and followed up with a comprehensive 11,000-word cover story in 2006, but private prisoner transport became mainstream news only in 2016, when the Marshall Project and The New York Times published an exposé on the subject. Their reporting showed that companies forced drivers to pay out of pocket for hotels; as a result, they often chose to drive nonstop, and prisoners said they were forced to urinate or defecate on themselves. While transferring a prisoner from Kentucky to Mississippi, a guard from the company Prisoner Transportation Services of America dismissed the man’s complaints of stomach pains and refused to stop. Soon after, the man died of a highly treatable ulcer. At least 56 prisoners have escaped from for-profit transportation companies since 2000, with at least 16 committing crimes while fleeing. By comparison, California, Texas, and Florida, whose state-run transport systems shuttle some 800,000 people every year, reported a single escape over the same period.

Prison Legal News published its first major story on
The Big Business of Prison Phone Calls

The evidence that these companies save money is mixed. But they can sweeten the deal with commissions they pay to the states.

contracts at first mandated that video visitation—with rates averaging $1 per minute—replace previously free in-person visitation, but after outcries, Global Tel*Link and Securus removed these provisions. However, because of the kickbacks and the reduced security costs associated with video visitation, many jails have gone ahead and implemented the policy anyway. A 2015 study by the Prison Policy Initiative found that 74 percent of jails that adopt video visitation end up reducing or eliminating in-person visits. In a scene worthy of dystopian fiction, visitors may sit in a room next to their loved ones but must use a grainy video-visitation kiosk to see them.

In 1833, two years before Alexis de Tocqueville published Democracy in America, he helped write a lesser-known study, On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France. The report was generally damning ("the prisons...offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism"), and Tocqueville noted America’s penchant for inviting private profit-making into public prisons. Contractors who exploited the prisoners for labor also profited from selling them essential items:

The contractor is the most important person attached to the prison. The overseers of the workshops, the contre-maîtres, cooks, bakers, victual sellers, laundresses, apothecaries, attendants of the sick, servants, hommes de peine, and all others, whose functions are subject to no surveillance whatever, are chosen by the contractor. It is clear that he does not accept the contract except with almost certain chances of great profit.

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In 1887, Congress passed a law eliminating contract
labor in the federal system, and the states soon followed. The market described by Tocqueville collapsed, and for the first half of the 20th century, public correctional agencies assumed nearly all aspects of management for adult prisons, from food and clothing to the commissary and health care.

But then a series of disastrous policies in the 1960s and ’70s—beginning with President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Crime—led to an explosion in the prison population. From 1972 to 1985, the number of people in America's prisons doubled. Prison conditions began to deteriorate, and in 1976, a Texas prisoner named J.W. Gamble filed a lawsuit complaining that the state denied him proper medical treatment after a 600-pound bale of cotton fell on him during a work assignment. The case, *Estelle v. Gamble*, made it to the Supreme Court, where Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote for the majority that “deliberate indifference to serious medical needs of prisoners” was a violation of the Eighth Amendment’s protection against cruel and unusual punishment. By 1985, prison systems in 34 states were under court supervision for violating the constitutional rights of prisoners. States, hobbled by budget shortfalls, struggled to comply with court orders. At the same time, the prison population continued to swell. President Ronald Reagan’s War on Drugs had begun, and its harsh sentencing laws guaranteed a steady influx of newly incarcerated Americans.

At this point, policy-makers could have reckoned with the wisdom of incarcerating almost half a million people. But the Reagan administration had something else in mind. The president assembled an advisory body of executives from the country’s largest banks and corporations and tasked them to “work like tireless bloodhounds” to cut costs and ferret out inefficiency in the federal government. The advisory body’s conclusion was to hand over functions like the postal service and air-traffic control to private enterprise. When it came to criminal justice, the administration, citing the notoriously inhumane conditions of America’s public prisons, recommended that the Department of Justice “give high priority to research on private sector involvement in corrections.”

A cynical way to look at correctional privatization is just business smelling blood and going in for the kill; the generous interpretation is that companies swooped in to save a failing government model. Regardless, the administration had something for which to pay staff salaries. In Orange County, less than 4 percent of phone and commissary commissions were used to pay staff salaries. In 2011, a budget report found that all commissions are deposited into its Prisoner Benefit Fund, which may be used to pay only for items that serve prisoners, like cable TV and exercise equipment. “Michigan has never looked at [commissions] as a revenue generator,” he said. But prisoner benefit funds have little oversight, and while there’s no evidence that Michigan has ever diverted the money, several other jurisdictions have. In Los Angeles, 49 percent of funds dedicated to inmate welfare go to routine jail maintenance. A 2011 budget report from Jefferson County, Colorado, revealed that 89 percent of phone and commissary commissions were used to pay staff salaries. In Orange County, less than 4 percent of its fund went to programs benefiting prisoners.

Story estimated that she has spent $75 to $100 a month, on average, during her son’s seven years of incarceration. "You can’t lift a finger without somebody profiting off of it," she said. To keep costs low, she limited phone calls to her son to every Saturday morning, for which Global Tel*Link charged her $3.43 for 10 minutes, plus a $3.95 fee simply for putting money into the account. “You put $15 on there, but you only get $10 worth of phone calls,” she said. (The state has since capped prison phone calls at 16¢ per minute, but the same call from jail can run as high as $22.56.) If Story wanted to send an e-mail, JPay, a privately owned company that has been dubbed the Apple of the prison system, charged her a starting rate of 25 cents per message.

Every few months, she would order a SecurePak care package from the Keefe Group, for up to $100 plus a $3 handling fee. In between care packages, she’d deposit $100 into her son’s Keefe commissary account, plus a fee of $2.95, so he could buy the necessities like toothpaste ($3.82) and deodorant ($3.49) that many Michigan families say aren’t provided in sufficient quantities by the prison. Her son, who is diabetic, would also have to use that money to pay Corizon’s $5 co-pays if he wanted to see a doctor.

Some argue that the Michigan Department of Corrections has an incentive to permit all these charges. As with the phone companies, the various contracts are structured to kick back a cut of the fees to the state. The department receives 5 cents for every e-mail sent, $10 for every tablet computer sold, and 50 percent of printing fees if prisoners choose to save e-mails on paper. For each $100 care package, the department receives $19. If someone purchases $100 worth of commissary goods, that’s another $19.

Chris Gautz, a spokesman for the department, said that all commissions are deposited into its Prisoner Benefit Fund, which may be used to pay only for items that serve prisoners, like cable TV and exercise equipment. “Michigan has never looked at [commissions] as a revenue generator,” he said. But prisoner benefit funds have little oversight, and while there’s no evidence that Michigan has ever diverted the money, several other jurisdictions have. In Los Angeles, 49 percent of funds dedicated to inmate welfare go to routine jail maintenance. A 2011 budget report from Jefferson County, Colorado, revealed that 89 percent of phone and commissary commissions were used to pay staff salaries. In Orange County, less than 4 percent of its fund went to programs benefiting prisoners.

Story estimated that she has spent $75 to $100 a month, on average, during her son’s years of incarceration—a sum that likely approaches $5,000. “It put a dent in my pocket,” said Story, who recently retired from AT&T, but “I was able to [afford it].” Many others aren’t as fortunate, though. According to a recent study exploring the
hidden community costs of incarceration, 82 percent of families are responsible for phone and visitation costs—and of these, one in three families go into debt to pay for them. Of the family members responsible for these costs, 87 percent are women, and because of the racial bias in American criminal justice, the majority of those women are likely from communities of color.

A few days after I met Story, I had lunch with June Walker, who founded the support group Story attends. Walker said many people might think, “What’s the big deal about a $3.95 fee?” But it’s not just one fee; it’s a constant trickle. “It’s death by a thousand pennies,” she said, gesturing out the window at a neighborhood still scarred by the 2008 recession. Census tract 5129, across from Hope Community Church, has a median annual income of $16,992. “Most people around here just don’t have a lot of pennies to spare.”

Some 1,400 miles away, just across from the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Miami, a 35-story office building angles skyward, covered in missile-resistant glass the color of the Bay of Biscayne. The building is home to a number of financial companies, including a private-equity firm called HIG Capital, which manages more than $30 billion in assets. HIG has one of the more unusual side hustles of any private-equity firm: Over the past decade, it has quietly helped consolidate correctional phone, food, commissary, and health-care companies into behemoths that dominate their markets and, according to critics, drive prices up for families while lowering quality.

A closer look at HIG reveals some surprising truths about the relationship between high finance and incarceration in America. HIG entered the correctional industry in 2004, when it merged T-Netix and Evercom, then two of the leaders in the correctional calling market, to form Securus. After the 2008 financial crisis, profits at Securus accelerated just as economies in cities like Detroit crashed. HIG sold the company in 2011, but its growth trajectory had been set. In a company presentation in 2015 obtained by The Huffington Post, the company boasted that the tens of billions of dollars the government spends on corrections each year offers “a large, recession-resistant and stable market” and that Securus was “well-positioned for organic growth.” Today, Securus provides phone services to 1.2 million men and women incarcerated at 3,400 facilities, with likely annual revenues of over $500 million. HIG then used a similar playbook to consolidate the correctional food and health-care industries. First, HIG acquired Trinity Food Services, the food and commissary company that was partly responsible for Michigan’s debacle. Four years, several acquisitions, and a merger (with commissary giant Keefe Group) later, HIG’s correctional food company controlled more than half of the $1.6 billion prison-commissary market. During that time, HIG acquired California Forensic Medical Group, which serves 90 percent of outsourced...
counties in California, and merged it with industry heavyweight Correct Care Solutions. HIG’s health-care company, Wellpath, formed last October, is on track to become the largest company in the correctional health-care industry, with $1.6 billion in revenue.

HIG has a different interpretation of its role in the privatized-prison services industry. In a comment to *The Nation*, Jeff Zanarini, a managing director at HIG, rejected the claim that the company’s consolidation strategy has radically reshaped the prison landscape. “In fact,” he wrote in an e-mail, “given the size and scope of the two companies referenced above that we currently own, it is accurate to say that H.I.G. plays ‘no role whatsoever in shaping the nation’s jails and prisons.’” He further suggested that, to the extent HIG did play a role, it was a positive one. “The two companies we do own are focused on improving the health and wellbeing of prison populations, while providing services that are far superior to the available alternatives (i.e., the provision of such services by state and local governments),” he wrote. “So, again, contrary to your thesis, our portfolio companies aim to provide higher quality services to inmates and their families at more affordable prices.”

But critics disagree, particularly with the notion that private-equity companies like HIG have played only a vanishingly small part in the ongoing prison privatization frenzy. Bianca Tylek said that when she was sifting through the 3,100 companies in her Corrections Accountability Project report, she noticed a peculiar trend: “On a systemic level, the thing that really emerged is how active private equity has been in shaping the prison-industrial complex and how many of the biggest actors in the field are owned by private-equity companies.” She paused. “In fact, almost all of them are.”

She said private-equity-brokered roll-ups—deals like HIG’s that bundle fragmented regional players into national conglomerates—have profoundly reshaped the correctional-services industry. “Without PE shops, these companies could not have become as big and as exploitative as they are today.”

It took me only a few Google searches to grasp how difficult it would be to prove Tylek’s intuition about private equity’s negative effects on the justice system. Anyone looking for insight faces three layers of opacity: Most correctional-services companies are privately held, meaning financial information is hard to come by; private-equity firms are lightly regulated, with few public-reporting requirements; and the correctional systems are notoriously hostile to outside scrutiny.

At a loss, I called a friend who has worked in private equity, who said corrections is a niche industry that cuts across business sectors, so there are no analysts who look at it as a whole. He suggested calling Wall Street analysts who cover publicly traded private-prison companies, whose dealings are less hidden from view; none could offer any insight. I looked to academia, but several economists said no one studies the role of private equity in corrections.

I finally found Sabrina Howell, an assistant professor of finance at NYU’s Stern School of Business. She doesn’t study private equity in corrections, but she just published a study on the disastrous role of private equity in for-profit education. She and her co-authors obtained data on nearly 1,000 schools owned by private-equity firms. After controlling for confounding variables, they discovered that private-equity-owned schools have higher profits—but also higher tuition, sharp declines in graduation rates, more student borrowing, lower repayment rates, and dramatic increases in illegal activities such as recruiting quotas and misrepresentation of loan terms. Despite worse outcomes, private-equity-owned schools were better at capturing federal aid. “This is a purely rent-seeking phenomenon and is unambiguously not in students’ or taxpayers’ interests,” her study concluded.

After seeing my research, Howell said, “There are definitely parallels here.” In both cases, she pointed out, the government serves as middleman between a company and its clientele—via federal loans in education and via state contracts in prisons. Under this arrangement, what’s good for the company and the government might not be good for the clients. These misaligned incentives played a role in distorting the for-profit education market. “If anything,” she said, “in prisons the potential for misaligned incentives is much more extreme.”

The profound level of consolidation stuck out to her. “In principle,” she continued, “private-equity firms could combine companies to achieve economies of scale and drive prices down without a loss of quality.” But in practice, only a few companies dominate a given sector, enjoying monopoly-like conditions. Without hard evidence, Howell couldn't speculate about the effects that extreme consolidation might have on this industry. But generally, she said, “it’s well established that having just one or two companies serving a market can yield monopolistic pricing and collusive outcomes.”

Tylek was less guarded in her assessment: “These roll-ups and buyouts and sales aren’t just some esoteric financial deals. They exploit real people, particularly those from low-income, minority, and—increasingly—immigrant communities.”

In February 2018, Michigan’s then-governor, Rick Snyder, appeared in the Capitol rotunda to present his $56.8 billion annual budget to the state legislature’s appropriations committees. The otherwise soporific event was interrupted by chants of “Tricky Ricky” from protesters demanding that Snyder return correctional food services to state workers. The protesters weren’t particularly optimistic, but then Snyder dropped a bombshell. “We’ve worked...
with a couple of different private vendors,” he said. “The benefits of continuing on that path don’t outweigh the costs, and we should transition back to doing it in-house.”

Six months later, the food-privatization experiment in Michigan ended, and now, for the first time in decades, nationwide mass incarceration is showing signs of slowing. The companies see the writing on the wall. To insulate themselves, they continue to consolidate and diversify, with the same company that runs the phones also running, say, the prison store and selling software to help corrections officials surveil prisoners. Or the companies push deeper into the one market that shows no signs of flagging: Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facilities.

Unlike in corrections, the majority of immigrant-detention facilities (73 percent) are fully private—a well-publicized fact. Less widely known is that the same food, healthcare, commissary, and financial-services companies that dominate America’s jails and prisons also profit off subcontracts with ICE detention centers, such as the notorious processing facility in Adelanto, California. Wellpath (owned by HIG) runs health care, and Keefe Group (also owned by HIG) runs the commissaries. Now, thanks in part to the center’s history of violations, Adelanto has decided to end its contract with ICE and the private-prison operator Geo Group to host the facility.

The profits that companies like Keefe and Wellpath extract from immigration detention centers are admittedly small, a point pressed by Zanarini, who described detention centers as “an inmatemal portion” of the companies’ business. Yet even if profits are “immaterial,” they are not zero—a fact that at least some of the funds’ investors might not like to be made public.

Private-equity firms don’t typically reveal their investors to the public. But by examining tax documents, government filings, and investment reports, I was able to make a partial list of HIG fund investors that benefit from mass incarceration and, to a lesser degree, immigration detention policies. The results were surprising.

A number of public pensions have invested in the HIG fund that controls Wellpath, including ones from Tennessee and Orange County, California, as well as the Ohio Highway Patrol’s. A wider range of organizations have invested in the HIG funds controlling the Keefe Group, including the Knight Foundation, the Sherman Fairchild Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Police & Fire Pension Association of Colorado, and the Producer-Writers Guild of America Pension Plan.

In a twist, the State of Michigan Retirement Systems, which pays out correctional officers’ pensions, had $25 million in one of the two funds that control Keefe, according to a 2015 quarterly investment review. Ron Leix, the deputy public information officer at the Michigan Department of Treasury, played down the multimillion-dollar investment, calling it “tiny.” Nonetheless, because the Michigan Department of Corrections contracts its commissaries and care-package service to Keefe, the department’s staffers, however indirectly, have benefited from the fees that Keefe charges prisoners and their families. David Angel, the retired Michigan kitchen officer, was appalled by the investment, calling it a “conflict of interest.” If officers had known, he said, “we’d have maybe put pressure on the pension system to pull their pin on that.”

I also found that the University of California, which in 2015 announced its divestment of $30 million in private-prison stock, had $29.5 million invested in funds that control Keefe, according to a 2017 report detailing the university’s private equity holdings.

Still, as uncomfortable as these investments make endowments and universities with lofty missions, few of us are spared. In a complex economy, it’s nearly impossible to avoid the tentacles of the prison-industrial complex. I’m no exception: The reporting for this article was supported by a grant administered through the University of California.

**In 1998, Angela Davis popularized the term “prison-industrial complex” to describe the sprawling web of commercial and governmental interests in corrections, which seeks to sustain itself regardless of actual need. The term is as boring as it is foreboding, the phenomenon as predictable as it is intractable. The stark reality is that punishment in America has always had an appalling financial**

(continued on page 25)
A new breed of progressive politicians and activists is challenging the bipartisan consensus—but there’s a long way to go.
By now, Americans born after the 9/11 attacks may already be deploying overseas to avenge them. The Authorization for Use of Military Force—which passed just three days after the attacks, with only one dissenting vote and was followed by an expanded AUMF the following year—has been used to justify military actions in at least 20 countries from the Sahel to the Pacific Rim. The combined death toll from just Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan is estimated at half a million people. Presidents as different in ideology and temperament as George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump have expanded what has been called the Forever War—and their own executive powers to wage it—even as all three initially ran on some version of a more humble foreign policy.

Still, when I asked Bernie Sanders whether he would hope and expect Congress to rein in his ability to make war should he win the presidency, he didn’t hesitate. “Absolutely. Absolutely. Look, the Constitution is clear…. Congress has for a very long time abdicated that responsibility,” he said. “If I’m president, I will certainly be an advocate of that process.”

Left-wing intellectuals and anti-war activists have long called for the United States to end its permanent war footing across the Muslim world and to reconsider its close alliances with illiberal governments, like those of Saudi Arabia and Israel. But such views are much rarer in Washington, where lawmakers like Sanders are only beginning to meaningfully challenge the status quo. Somewhere between these two perspectives—that of the progressive policymaker and that of the radical critic—a new vision for America’s role in the world is being shaped. I went to Capitol Hill to explore why non-interventionists eager to realize this vision have homed in on one particular war.

Yemen, which borders Saudi Arabia but has roughly one-twentieth its per capita GDP, is currently suffering through what the United Nations, Sanders, and others I spoke with described as the worst humanitarian disaster in the world. The United States has been fighting Al Qaeda in Yemen since 9/11, using the AUMF as its justification and drone strikes against terrorism suspects as its main tactic. But in 2015, a Shiite militant group called the Houthis overthrew Yemen’s Saudi-aligned president, an ally in the US war on terrorism. In response, Saudi Arabia launched a military campaign that has since killed tens of thousands of civilians through bombings, cholera, and famine.

The Obama administration supported this campaign from the start, arming the Saudis and providing targeting information and refueling for Saudi jets, in what many in Washington see as a tacit trade-off for Obama’s 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. The Saudis see the Houthis as proxies for Iran, their main rival in the region.

“In hindsight, no, it was not the correct position,” said Ben Rhodes, one of Obama’s closest foreign-policy advisers. “But it was not without logic. The Saudis were hell-bent on doing something in Yemen…. And they also saw it as part of a broader Iranian ascent in the region. And frankly, we didn’t share that analysis. We did not see the Iranians as directing the Houthis.”

Rhodes denied that there was any quid pro quo of US support for the Saudis in exchange for the Iran deal. “Our basic theory was that by being somewhat engaged, we could deal with the inevitable Saudi intervention in Yemen while seeking to impose limits on what they did and to try to broker something diplomatically,” he said. He and his colleagues expected that Hillary Clinton would prevail in 2016 and would continue to use diplomatic levers to rein in the Saudis. When Trump won instead, it was immediately clear that the Saudis would be given a freer hand and that the situation would deteriorate.

And deteriorate it has. The Saudi-led coalition’s efforts
to capture the port of Hodeida last summer intensified what amounts to a crippling economic war against northern Yemen, where millions of people are at imminent risk of starvation. Images of emaciated children have become emblematic of the Yemeni campaign. At the same time, Democrats in Congress have become much more willing to criticize the war and the Saudis, especially since the shocking murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul last fall. While US efforts against Al Qaeda in Yemen are covered by the AUMF, US support for the Saudi campaign against the Houthis is not, which makes it especially vulnerable to congressional opposition.

“I thought the Obama administration was totally wrong to launch a military partnership with Saudi Arabia that set the stage for the devastation that has become Yemen,” said Senator Chris Murphy, who was the first lawmaker to attempt to end US support for the war. Murphy’s campaign was initially a lonely one, beginning with a 2016 bill co-sponsored by libertarian-leaning Senator Rand Paul that focused on ending arms sales to the Saudis. Only 27 senators supported it.

“I came here as a critic of this boneheaded US military intervention,” recalled Murphy, who first ran for Congress in 2006 as an opponent of the Iraq War. “I was interested in having a competing narrative with neconservatives who said that the only way to fight terrorism was to be at war in the Middle East.” That led him to study the roots of the extremist ideology motivating groups like Al Qaeda, from which he concluded that “Saudi Arabia and Gulf states were playing an enormous role.” That, in turn, made him an early critic of the war in Yemen at a time when most Democrats were reluctant to challenge Obama’s foreign policy.

While Sanders was not involved in Murphy’s initial efforts and really started speaking out about Yemen only after Trump took office, Murphy credited Sanders for “a really fantastic idea, which was to take the War Powers Act and turn it into a modern tool to end illegal wars.” That 1973 resolution, passed over Richard Nixon’s veto, theoretically reasserts Congress’s constitutional powers over the executive branch. This spring, in calling for cessation of US support for the Saudi war, a war powers resolution passed both houses of Congress—the first time this had ever been accomplished—only to be vetoed by Trump.

Representative Ro Khanna, who introduced the House version of the resolution, sees implications beyond Yemen. He said he hopes that his bill “would make future presidents think twice about getting into military conflicts and...would embolden Congress to check presidential overreach.” He cited a recent bill introduced by his colleague David Cicilline to preemptively prohibit the use of military force in Venezuela as another example of this approach. Ultimately, Khanna said, “we have to repeal the [AUMF],” but he also envisions using the War Powers Act to rein in other wars.

Khanna, who is a co-chair of Sanders’s presidential campaign, said that a Sanders administration “would certainly consult and get Congress’s consent” for any military intervention and “would be very reluctant to use force overseas.” He said he would anticipate a reduction in military spending, currently at record highs. However, he noted that many congressional Democrats, including some 2020 presidential candidates, have supported Trump’s military budgets. “You can’t criticize Trump’s foreign policy and then allocate him all the resources he wants for the overseas wars,” said Khanna.

At first glance, democrats seem united on Yemen, having voted almost unanimously to end US support for the Saudi war. But this superficial consensus papers over real divisions on what progressive foreign policy should mean in a post-Obama, post-Clinton era. When I brought up Rhodes to a Democratic Hill staffer who has been deeply involved in the House Yemen resolution, the staffer grew agitated.

“Where was Ben Rhodes on Libya in 2011? Where was he on Syria in 2013? Where was he on Yemen in 2015? Despite having people like him who ultimately ended up opposing the Iraq War and coining the term Blob,” the staffer said, using the now-ubiquitous term for the pro-interventionist Washington foreign-policy establishment, the Obama administration “did the utmost Blob decision-making, a 48-hour process behind closed doors without any democratic input at the behest of this brutal Saudi dictatorship.”

“I will get pretty defensive about this,” Rhodes said in response. “I’m not the problem.... I was willing to essentially walk up to the line of having my own reputation eviscerated to avoid another war with Iran.” He denied that he was involved in the meetings the staffer referenced, noting that he and the Saudis had an infamously strained relationship, although he insisted he doesn’t want to let himself off the hook. “I’ll take all the lumps, and people can pick apart those policies,” he added, “but at the end of the day, the challenges in our politics that lead to these outcomes have to do with much more deeply entrenched forces not just in the US government but in Congress itself. Where was Congress in helping us close the prison in Guantánamo? Where was Congress in passing [a more restrained] AUMF that we were asking them to do?”

Last November, Rhodes and more than two dozen other former Obama-administration officials—including his CIA director John Brennan, UN ambassador Samantha Power, and national security adviser Susan Rice and Hillary Clinton’s foreign-policy adviser Jake Sullivan—signed an open letter urging an end to US support for the Saudi war. “We did not intend for U.S. support for the coalition to become a blank check,” the letter reads. “But today, as civilian casualties have continued to rise and
there is no end to the conflict in sight, it is clear that is precisely what happened.”

Rhodes said that he would support a fuller accounting of the Obama administration’s role and that one was already underway but that the purpose of the letter was to lend the credibility of mainstream policy-makers to try to win over centrist Democrats in Congress. He added that a more introspective letter might have received fewer signatures.

Ending Wars isn’t such a radical idea outside Washington. Recent polling shows an overwhelming majority of Americans support going to war only as a last resort, winding down existing commitments, and cutting military aid to allies like Saudi Arabia. As Representative Mark Pocan, a co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said, “I think if you ask the average American…they don’t want us in endless wars overseas.” But “inside the Beltway it becomes far more difficult because there are a lot of lobbyists, think tanks, and organizations that are all trying to get in our ear about foreign policy.”

Perhaps the clearest difference between left-wing anti-war activists and Democratic lawmakers concerns the Israel-Palestine conflict. To many on the left, Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians recalls South African apartheid as a human-rights cause. Suffice it to say this is not how the issue plays on Capitol Hill, where the leadership in both parties rushed to condemn freshman Representative Ilhan Omar this year after her comments about the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and its financial sway over Congress.

AIPAC’s annual conference in Washington, during which everyone from Vice President Mike Pence to Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer took shots at Omar from the microphone, took place the same week I was in town. “I believe that you have organizations, like AIPAC and many, many others, who do exert obviously enormous impact over American policy,” said Sanders, who reached out to Omar to offer support after her remarks.

Khanna said he didn’t support the “piling on” against Omar and called it disproportionate but nonetheless added that her comments were “inappropriate.” Murphy, while noting he doesn’t always agree with AIPAC, has said that he used terminology that has been used by many, many others, who do it more than sincerely about their criticisms of Israel.”

Israel is a loaded issue in Washington. While J Street, which calls itself “pro-Israel, pro-peace,” has given progressive Democrats cover to distance themselves from an increasingly Republican-aligned AIPAC, challenging the basic premise of a close US-Israel alliance remains almost impossible. Omar, who is a Somali Muslim and wears a hijab, has quickly found herself the main target of the Israel lobby.

Besides her comments on Israel, Omar drew criticism from the Blob after she grilled Elliott Abrams, Trump’s special envoy to Venezuela, about his complicity in Reagan-era war crimes in Central America. It wasn’t just Republicans who criticized Omar for this; Kelly Magsamen, a former Obama-administration Pentagon official who now works on national security at the liberal Center for American Progress, defended Abrams on Twitter as a “fierce advocate for human rights and democracy.”

Matt Duss, Sanders’s foreign-policy adviser and a former CAP staffer, takes a different view of Omar. “People often use accusations of bigotry and anti-Semitism to suppress criticism of Israeli policy and particularly the occupation,” said Duss, who has been the target of similar attacks. Of Omar’s tussle with Abrams, Duss said, “I thought it was one of the greatest things I’ve ever seen. As the grandson of a refugee woman, to see this refugee woman take the opportunity as an elected representative to put this person on the spot for supporting the kind of violence that she survived…I felt like she honored my grandmother.”

Omar, it’s worth noting, went to Congress directly from an advocacy background, and she still sounds more like an activist than a conventional politician. Anti-war activists have labored for many years against the Washington foreign-policy consensus, and politicians are finally starting to listen.

“Democrats, particularly since 9/11, have essentially ceded the national security conversation to Republicans because there’s overarching fear of appearing weak,” said Kate Kizer, the policy director of Win Without War, an advocacy group that has played a key role in supporting the Iran nuclear deal and the Yemen resolutions. “It’s really interesting to see the new Congress come in and have a solid set of progressive members who are actually thinking about foreign policy differently…. You see this with Ilhan, who’s not afraid to speak her mind and challenge the status quo.”

In addition to Omar, Kizer was referring to Rashida Tlaib—a Palestinian American who shares with Omar the distinction of being the first Muslim women in Congress—as well as socialist superstar Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Those three new members of Congress are women, and so are the other advocates Kizer cited as being critical to the shifting conversation on Yemen, including Elizabeth Beavers at Indivisible, Iram Ali at MoveOn, and Kate Gould, who criticized Omar for this; Kelly Magsamen, a former Obama-administration Pentagon official who now works on national security at the liberal Center for American

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WHY THE HIGHLANDER ATTACK MATTERS

by Robin D.G. Kelley and Makani Themba

The Nation.

May 13, 2019

The arson attack on the Highlander Center, a longtime leader in racial- and social-justice work, is not merely a hate crime—it’s an act of war.

NEWS OF THE MARCH 29 ARSON ATTACK ON the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee, shocked progressives across the country. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but the blaze destroyed Highlander’s main office building, along with historical documents that had not yet been archived elsewhere. For the many familiar with the organization’s storied history, the devastation goes much deeper than property loss. It’s as though a sanctuary was violated.

And violated it was. Making clear their terrorist intentions, the attackers left their mark on the parking lot by spray-painting a symbol derived from the 1930s Romanian fascist Iron Guard. The same symbol was painted on one of the guns used in the recent attack on two mosques in New Zealand and scrawled alongside swastikas at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, campus in January 2018. The Highlander arson is the latest in a wave of racist terrorism.

For Highlander’s executive directors—Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson and the Rev. Allyn Maxfield-Steele—the attack was disheartening, frustrating, and terrifying but hardly surprising. “Because of our history,” they wrote in a press release, “we are not surprised that this space, one where marginalized people working across sectors, geographies, and identities, show up consistently, has been repeatedly targeted over our 87 years of existence.”

Highlander’s leadership and staff and many activists associated with its ongoing social-justice work understand the attack as an act of war. Situated on about 200 acres of land just east of Knoxville, Highlander has long been on the front lines of a battle against workers, poor farmers, people of color, and other marginalized communities. In a region ravaged by capitalist and racist exploitation—plant closures, environmental catastrophe from coal mining, dispossession, opioid addiction, state-sanctioned violence—Highlander is one of the few spaces where movements connect, dream, and build for the fight back.

Of course, fighting back is in the institution’s DNA. Myles Horton founded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1932. A Tennessee native, he attended Union Theological Seminary in the late 1920s, where under the tutelage of the legendary social-gospel theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Horton envisioned creat-
ing a radical educational space to advance social justice and democracy in the South.

It was southern workers and their militant allies, especially communists and socialists, who came to define Highlander’s trajectory. When Highlander opened, sharecroppers in Alabama were fighting for their lives, miners and steel and textile workers were preparing for a massive wave of strikes, and Unemployed Councils were popping up in cities across the Southeast. Horton was joined by key figures in the resurgent southern left—Don West, James Dombrowski, Howard Kester, Zilla Hawes, and others with various ties to the Socialist and Communist parties. In 1934, Highlander became the site for a united-front agreement between communists and socialists to support southern unionization on the basis of racial and gender equality and to resist fascism, lynching, anti-labor terrorism, and white supremacy.

The government did its best to shutter Highlander in 1961. Using anti-communism as its pretext, the Tennessee legislature voted to revoke the organization’s charter and seize all its property. Horton’s appeal to the US Supreme Court proved unsuccessful. Not to be deterred, the school reopened in a smaller house in Knoxville and secured a new charter as the Highlander Research and Education Center. Nor was the state deterred: Highlander continued to be a prime target of government surveillance and extralegal violence. In June 1963, police in Blount County raided an interracial camp organized by Highlander to train activists in the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience. Twenty-nine people were arrested, and four days later, the encampment was burned to the ground—most likely by the Ku Klux Klan. In 1966 the Klan organized a march on the center, and a few months later, someone tossed a Molotov cocktail through its front window. Fortunately, no one was injured, and the damage to the property was minimal.

During the center’s 10 years in Knoxville, it remained a hotbed of progressive action, in spite of the constant threats and intimidation. In fact, Highlander expanded its operation to other parts of the country, playing roles in the Poor People’s Campaign and Resurrection City—the campaign’s occupation of Washington, DC. And during the early 1970s, the center established a short-lived outpost in New Mexico and worked to build coalitions among the Chicano movement, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, Native American struggles for land and sovereignty, and working-class Appalachians fighting for land as a strategy to resist the coal industry and redistribute wealth.

In 1971 the center moved to its present location in New Market, Tennessee, where staffers became more directly involved in local initiatives to fight poverty, environmental devastation from strip mining, and outside corporate control of land and resources. The center helped support grassroots groups fighting pollution and toxic dumping and launch the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training program to instruct local leaders.

After the deadly 1984 gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, Highlander connected Bhopal survivors with people affected by the company’s operations in the United States. The center’s Stop the Pollution initiative trained and linked more than 800 grassroots activists—including factory workers, miners, teachers, and youths from Latinx, black, and indigenous communities—to deepen their environmental-justice work. Highlander supported the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network to help local organizations fight factory closures and falling wages.

Highlander continues to be a leader, facilitator, and incubator of justice work. It was at Highlander where the first media-justice gathering took place in 2002, launching a vital grassroots movement unabashedly led by people of color. Today the center supports organizing for immigration justice, youths, progressive cultural work, solidarity economy efforts, black and queer liberation, and so much more. The group has modeled independent communications by building its own Internet tower and even decreased its carbon footprint.

This is why the attack on Highlander matters to all of us who value justice and why together we must stand up to racist terrorism. As the center’s executive directors said in their press statement, “This is a time for building our power. Now is the time to be vigilant. To love each other and support each other and to keep each other safe in turbulent times.”

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During the 1830s:

The contractor, who sees nothing but a money affair in such a bargain, speculates upon the victuals as he does on the labor; if he loses upon the clothing, he indemnifies himself upon the food; and if the labor is less productive than he calculated upon, he tries to balance his loss by spending less for the support of the convicts.

In just the past few years, a movement to divest from the prison-industrial complex has taken off. New York State, New York City, and Philadelphia have sold their stocks in the two major corporations that operate private prisons. Columbia University became the first institution of higher education to divest, followed by the University of California system. In March, JPMorgan Chase announced that it would no longer finance the Geo Group and CoreCivic. But private-prison companies are only a small (if highly visible) part of the prison-industrial complex, and stocks only a portion of most institutional investors’ portfolios.

Divestment activists will have their work cut out for them. Mass incarceration isn’t just an ugly societal outgrowth that can be lopped off; the excision of these industries would have unexpected, reverberating effects throughout the national economy that would likely hurt not just financial firms but also pensioners.

When I mentioned this to Alex Friedmann, he shrugged off the collateral damage. “You know,” he said, “slavery had a lot of economic benefits. A lot of people owned slaves and produced goods, and a lot of ordinary people benefited from those goods, and so on. But nobody today would say, ‘Well, we should have just reformed slavery, improved slavery, reduced it to an acceptable level.’ There is no acceptable level. And that’s my position on profiting off incarceration: There is no acceptable level. It’s inherently morally and ethically wrong.”
cation at Michigan State University who has become an outspoken advocate against the war, is a case in point. She has been coordinating with Yemeni activists across the United States to lobby members of Congress since 2015. “They became much more clearly anti-intervention when it was no longer Obama’s war,” she said, adding that the scope of the humanitarian crisis was evident from the very start. “If Democrats had really taken the opportunity to critique Obama at the beginning, we wouldn’t be here today.”

Kizer identified Yemen as a key issue in mainstreaming progressive foreign-policy goals, in part because it’s less politically fraught than Israel-Palestine. “Yemen represents a really critical on-ramp to change the conversation in DC, because even though there are the parallels to the Israel-Palestine conflict or US military support for Egypt,” she said, “Yemen doesn’t necessarily have the same domestic constituency, and it isn’t automatically alienating.” In other words, while the Blob may support the US-Saudi alliance just as fervently as the US-Israel alliance and while the Saudis engage in influence campaigns via think tanks and media outlets, there’s no Saudi equivalent to AIPAC and no significant electoral constituency in favor of famine in Yemen. The conflict there is the perfect example of a war that is politically feasible only in the absence of public debate.

To understand why progressives in Congress have unified around Yemen, it’s useful to compare it with one of the biggest foreign-policy fights of the past decade. Throughout Obama’s second term, he faced constant pressure from the Blob to intervene militarily to stop Bashar al-Assad’s human-rights abuses in Syria—pressure Obama mostly resisted, covert actions notwithstanding. He even took the rare step of punting to Congress the decision to strike Syria, correctly assuming that congressional Republicans wouldn’t take up the issue. Many hawks in Washington accused Obama of complicity in Assad’s atrocities through inaction.

But the geopolitical context of Syria is completely different from Yemen’s. Assad is not a US proxy and enjoys the backing of Iran and Russia. Obama saw no clear way to intervene in Syria without setting off an escalation of violence. In Yemen, meanwhile, an ally is carrying out atrocities with direct US support. To many on the left, the enthusiasm for air strikes in Syria and simultaneous silence about the US role in Yemen speak volumes about the sincerity of the Blob’s humanitarian intentions.

“Yemen is a case of humanitarian non-intervention,” said Stephen Wertheim, a historian of international relations at Columbia University. “It marks a generational shift from the Samantha Power–esque humanitarian interventionism that sounded progressive a few decades ago but no longer does.” Power is a longtime advocate for military intervention to prevent genocide and human-rights abuses. “The Yemen campaign suggests the opposite principle: If we want to help suffering humanity, we should first and foremost make sure that the United States is not causing the suffering.”

For now, any anti-war legislation is dead on arrival at the White House. Despite sometimes gesturing at a different approach while campaigning, as president, Trump has consistently deferred to some of the most hawkish voices in Washington, from Abrams to John Bolton, and has doubled down on the alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel. At least for the next two years, Washington will continue to wage war across the Muslim world with few checks on the executive branch’s ability to do so. But depending on who succeeds Trump, perhaps the Forever War can finally end, as all wars eventually must.
Before they started their successful wildcat strike last year, West Virginia teachers railed against the introduction of a workplace wellness program called Go365. The program coerced employees into downloading an app that would monitor their health, rewarding points for exercise and good behavior. Employees who failed to accrue 3,000 points by the end of the year would be penalized with a $25 monthly fee and increased deductibles. Although the program was made voluntary before the strike began (and has since been eliminated), the outrage over Go365 helped ignite the strike. As one teacher told *The New York Times*, “People felt that was very invasive, to have to download that app and to be forced into turning over sensitive information.”

By resisting Go365, the West Virginia teachers waged two battles at once: They fought in the trenches of state austerity and on the front lines of private digital surveillance. The app presaged many of the worrying trends that Shoshana Zuboff describes in her new book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. She explains that Silicon Valley firms are looking to wearable technologies and other smart devices to gain an increasingly detailed view of our physical and emotional health. Go365 measured teachers’ daily steps with the help of a Fitbit; Sleep Number beds measure the hours we keep and the quality of our rest; a new company called Realeyes plans to surveil our facial expressions as we watch advertisements, interpreting our emotions in real time.

Silicon Valley firms don’t want to...
simply monitor our behavior, however; they plan to shape it, too. Their influence over our actions might be indirect for now, effected through the prizes and penalties that Go365 weaponized against teachers. But by integrating these devices into our daily lives, these companies also set the stage for a future of more direct intervention. Zuboff quotes one software developer fantasizing aloud about the tech industry’s ability to push and prod us remotely: “We can know if you shouldn’t be driving, and we can just shut your car down…we tell the TV to shut off and make you get some sleep, or the chair to start shaking because you shouldn’t be sitting so long.”

Drawing on thorough research as well as alarming interviews like that one, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* offers an urgent warning about our possible future. Zuboff discusses the technological innovations and market mechanisms that make ubiquitous surveillance increasingly likely. Although her diagnosis is chilling, her solutions are few. Throughout the book, she decries the abuses perpetrated by Silicon Valley companies and argues that they represent a radical break from an earlier, kinder form of capitalism. But by refusing to acknowledge the continuities between past modes of exploitation and the latest horrors of surveillance capitalism, she ultimately leads readers away from the most promising paths of resistance.

Zuboff has been hailed as a “maverick management guru” and a “prophet of the information age.” A former columnist at *Fast Company* and *Businessweek* and one of the first women tenured at Harvard Business School, she has been a leading voice on information technology, business, and the workplace for over 30 years. She first gained wide attention for her 1988 book, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, an early and influential study of how computer technology would affect the American workforce. This project was notable in its ambition, and Zuboff set an even more ambitious goal for herself in a 2015 article that sketched the fundamentals of surveillance capitalism: “Just a moment ago,” she writes, “it still seemed reasonable to focus our concerns on the challenges of an information workplace or an information society. Now, the enduring questions of authority and power must be addressed to the widest possible frame…information civilization.” In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, which runs over 700 pages, she sets out to describe the dawn of a civilization—one that she argues will be dominated by Silicon Valley and its surveillance apparatus.

In the first section of her sprawling book, Zuboff traces the birth of surveillance capitalism to the moment in 2003 when Google filed a patent titled “Generating User Information for Use in Targeted Advertising.” In Google’s early days, she explains, the company linked advertising only to search queries. Meanwhile, the vast quantities of data that it gathered about particular users (including “the number and pattern of search terms…dwell times, click patterns, and location”) were used only to improve users’ experience. The 2003 patent, however, promised to convert that “data exhaust into “behavioral surplus” that could be used to increase the precision of targeted advertising, a much more lucrative venture. This approach to data collection became so successful, she argues, that it led to a new logic of accumulation: From 2003 on, Google was on a quest to gather and monetize as much user data as possible.

The “extraction imperative,” as Zuboff calls it, eventually migrated beyond Google. In 2008, Google executive Sheryl Sandberg (whom Zuboff dubs the “Typhoid Mary” of surveillance capitalism) left the search giant for a position at Facebook. Her aim was to monetize the intimate information that Mark Zuckerberg’s company has gathered from users, transforming Facebook from “a social networking site to an advertising behemoth.” From there, word spread fast, with giants like Microsoft, AT&T, Verizon, and Comcast joining the behavioral-surplus extraction business.

Today, companies of all kinds are trying to get into the game. Samsung’s smart TV records private conversations in living rooms across the country; the latest Roomba vacuum maps its users’ floor plans; the CEO of Allstate Insurance hopes, in his own words, to “sell this information we get from people driving around to various people and capture some additional profit source.” These companies belong to industries outside Silicon Valley’s traditional purview of high-tech devices and Internet platforms, but what they share with Google and Facebook is a desire to generate profit from their intimate knowledge of our behavior and experience.

Zuboff shows that these increasingly frequent invasions of our privacy are neither accidental nor optional; instead, they’re a key source of profit for many of the 21st century’s most successful companies. Thus, these companies have a direct financial stake in the broadening, deepening, and perfecting of the surveillance they already profit from—and in making sure that it remains legal. As a result of this boom in data extraction, new technologies are emerging as well: Engineers are intent on developing tools that will mine all sorts of dark data—the Silicon Valley term for those dimensions of human experience currently inaccessible to algorithmic analysis. To mine dark data, Google, Facebook, and others are developing smart homes and wearable devices, self-driving cars, drones, and augmented reality. They’re even striving to monitor the body’s inner workings through digestible sensors and to map a person’s inner life through so-called emotion analytics.

The primary purpose of these disturbing new technologies is not to influence consumer behavior but to generate accurate predictions about it. Yet that “prediction imperative,” as Zuboff calls it, naturally leads back to a desire for influence. For example, Facebook boasts a “loyalty prediction” service that identifies “individuals who are ‘at risk’ of shifting their brand allegiance” and prompts advertisers to intervene swiftly. The goal, Zuboff explains, is not just to get to know us better but also to find ways to manipulate and control our actions in the service of advertisers. As one chief data scientist told her, “Conditioning at scale is essential to the new science of massively engineered human behavior.”

The most persuasive (and terrifying) sections of her book chart this rapid growth of Silicon Valley’s ambitions, from mass data extraction to ubiquitous monitoring to widespread behavior modification.

The third section of Zuboff’s book is dedicated to describing a new ideology—instrumentarianism—that she says will dominate the 21st century. To explain this new species of power, she returns first to the midcentury work of the psychologist B.F. Skinner, who argued that free will was an illusion and that any action that seemed freely chosen or spontaneous was just a behavior that had yet to be predicted, explained, and conditioned by behavioral psychology. Eventually, Skinner posited, such analysis could be used to replace the chaos of individual “freedom

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism

The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power
By Shoshana Zuboff
PublicAffairs. 704 pp. $38
WITHOUT ONLINE ACCESS, YOU’RE ONLY GETTING HALF THE STORY.
(SOUND FAMILIAR?)

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with large-scale social engineering. This idea, Zuboff argues, has now been taken up by leading researchers like MIT’s Alex “Sandy” Pentland, whose 2014 article “The Death of Individuality” suggests that we ought to do away with the individual as the governing unit of rationality and focus on how our society is governed by a “collective intelligence.” Although most Silicon Valley developers seem to lack Skinner’s and Pentland’s utopian (or, rather, dystopian) ambitions, Zuboff warns that their quest to profit from behavior modification will eventually merge with instrumentarianism’s project of social control.

The book presents instrumentarianism as a “decisive break” from an earlier, apparently more beneficent form of capitalism. Zuboff praises market capitalism at length near the end of the book, arguing that it “awakened the unstoppable march toward liberty” in the United States and the United Kingdom and helped “lift much of humankind from millennia of ignorance, poverty, and pain.” But she worries that today’s surveillance capitalism violates some of the core tenets of this earlier model, including liberal individualism, the bourgeois home, the invisible hand, and what she terms the “organic reciprocities” between capital and labor. Drawing on Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek, she complains that the vast amounts of data available to technology companies will make once-unknown markets predictable, thus granting those companies an unprecedented power over our economic lives. She notes that Silicon Valley has relatively few employees and an unusual relationship to its customer base (depending on users whose data is extracted, as opposed to traditional consumers). For this reason, she argues, Mark Zuckerberg does not exist in the same mutually beneficial relationship to the public that Henry Ford once did.

It is in her discussion of market democracy that the limitations of Zuboff’s analysis come to the fore. For her, the market—before the rise of platform monopolies (and, to a lesser degree, neoliberalism)—was characterized by individual liberty and free choice. Accordingly, she is uninterested in how surveillance might deepen the forms of exploitation and coercion that always structured market capitalism, particularly for marginalized and racialized communities. Her commitment to the free market also explains why she spends very little time considering the role that the state might play in countering Silicon Valley’s power. In the recent essay collection Economics for the Many, Nick Srnicek advocates for the socialization of platform monopolies like Facebook. Though his proposal is flawed (Srnicek concedes that the state could put our private data to different dystopian ends), it rises to the scale of ambition necessary to address this threat. Zuboff, by contrast, spends a lot of time encouraging us to act but gives us very little sense of how.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism succeeds in painting a dark portrait of Silicon Valley’s growing power, but it ultimately fails in its political analysis. In whose service and at whose expense is the control of surveillance capitalism effected? Zuboff reaches for the grandest possible explanation: She argues that Silicon Valley is in the thrall of a radical instrumentarian ideology that aims to supplant liberal individualism with large-scale social engineering. But we don’t need a spooky new political theory to explain what’s going on; it’s already perfectly legible in the context of liberal capitalism. Companies do not pursue control in a quest for Skinner’s or Pentland’s engineered utopias. Their goals are much simpler: first, to accrue profits through targeted advertising and, second, to promote their direct economic and political interests. The problem with surveillance capitalism is as much the capitalism as it is the surveillance.

At the close of her book, Zuboff seeks to stir her readers to collective action against the behemoths of Silicon Valley. She argues that we cannot treat the invasion of our privacy as a personal problem to be managed with new forms of encryption or evasion. Instead, we must treat it as a social problem to be tackled through widespread democratic contestation. “The individual alone cannot shoulder the burden of justice,” she writes, “any more than an individual worker in the first years of the twentieth century could bear the burden of fighting for fair wages and working conditions… A century ago, workers organized for collective action and ultimately tipped the scales of power… today’s ‘users’ will have to mobilize in new ways.” For an example of such inspiring collective action, she looks to an activist group called None of Your Business, which aims to impose significant fines on companies that fail to uphold existing privacy regulations.

While her desire to fight back is, of course, noble, Zuboff’s subtle rhetorical slide from “workers” to “users” is troubling. For her, the battle for “fair wages and working conditions” is apparently a thing of the past, resolved a century ago when workers finally “tipped the scales of power.” Of course, we know that these fights are far from over—and surveillance capitalism is poised to make them much more difficult. Silicon Valley doesn’t just harm workers in Amazon fulfillment centers or Chinese iPhone factories, although these violations are horrific enough. It also makes all workers more vulnerable to the spying and prying of their bosses. Zuboff describes a new service for employers (and landlords) that scraps and analyzes applicants’ social-media activity, including private messages, to assess their character. Meanwhile, Pentland proposes the use of “unobtrusive wearable sensors” called sociometers that would help managers “infer the relationships between colleagues.”

Although Zuboff notes these examples, she spends very little time discussing them, instead focusing on how surveillance capitalism can affect us during our leisure hours, when we approach technology primarily as users. She emphasizes surveillance in the home over surveillance in the office; she is more worried about how we’re manipulated while shopping than working. Once again, her nostalgia for an earlier form of market capitalism limits the power of her critique: Zuboff is so intent on protecting an idealized image of the liberal individual (someone who exchanges freely on the market and then returns to the privacy of home) that she gives little attention to the corners of our society that capitalism has always subjected to surveillance: prisons, hospitals, borders, workplaces.

The good news, though: While Zuboff may ignore it, labor also offers a site of resistance that is much more promising than the regulations and fines advocated by None of Your Business. If those at the margins of our society are the most likely to be directly affected by surveillance, then building power at those margins—among tenants, debtors, immigrants, prisoners, and, of course, workers—will allow us to resist the worst abuses of surveillance capitalism at the point of their application. The teachers in West Virginia knew that Go365 threatened their dignity and their livelihood. They used the power of their union to fight back and win. In resisting the rise of surveillance capitalism, we should look to examples like theirs.
In an Israeli documentary titled *Precious Life*, a little boy in Gaza with a deadly autoimmune disease is offered a chance at treatment in a Tel Aviv hospital by an Israeli pediatrician, an Israeli journalist who raises funds for the operation, and an anonymous donor who agrees to provide the money. All that remains is to find an organ match for the transplant. While everyone is anxiously waiting, the journalist engages the child’s mother in conversation. He tells her that he is troubled by the idea of Palestinian martyrdom, because all “life is precious.” The mother replies that she accepts the idea of martyrdom, because death is normal for her people. “No,” she tells him, “life isn’t precious.” The journalist asks about the boy they are trying to save: Would she let him become a martyr? The mother says she would. The journalist is baffled and disturbed, but leaves the conversation there. Then Israel invades Gaza. The invasion delays the operation, which nearly costs the child his life, although he is eventually saved. Many other Palestinians are not as lucky. While in Gaza, the documentary’s director finds himself in conversation with a surgeon, who asks him why he is making a film about the saving of one life while Israel is taking the lives of hundreds. We learn that three of the surgeon’s daughters have just been killed in the bombing of their home.

Anthropologist Didier Fassin uses these scenes in his new book, *Life: A Critical User’s Manual*, to argue against the confident tendency among many in the Global North to treat an individual life as sacred while refusing to address the social structures that cause many lives to be treated as anything but. His targets are readers in places like Israel and the United States whose lives, despite the fearmongering on the right in both countries, are not particularly endangered; his hope is to get them to understand the political imperatives that determine the lives—as well as the deaths—of so many others both in the Global North and elsewhere, places where life’s flagrant riskiness and the inequality of its value must unfortunately be taken for granted. By making this argument, Fassin redirects his readers away from humanitarianism’s self-congratulatory ethic of rescue and toward a structural politics that aims at the transformation of collective life.

Trained as a medical doctor as well as an anthropologist, Fassin is especially sensitive to cases in which the saving of an
individual life is presented as the definitive humanitarian gesture. In Palestine, to adopt a medical model of rescue and think in such terms is, in Fassin’s view, to be distracted from the larger and more pressing issue of justice for Palestine, however that justice might be defined. Distracting people from these longer-term questions of social change, he speculates, may even be what the medical model of rescue is intended to do.

Fassin develops this argument further in his book’s discussion of refugees and asylum seekers, or sans-papiers, in France. In 1998, the country adopted a new and seemingly humanitarian policy, opening its doors to “undocumented migrants whose life was endangered by a serious health issue for which treatment was not accessible in their home countries,” at the same time that it was closing its doors to refugees in the strict sense. Seven years after the law changed, “the chance of being regularized was…seven times higher when one’s life was threatened by [physical] disease rather than by a risk of persecution.” Disease, as Fassin observes, seems both objective and value-free: it resides in the cells and the organs. On the contrary, persecution implies taking the side of victims and delivering value judgments: it is about causes and ideologies. The institutions of the host countries feel more comfortable with the supposed neutrality of the former than with the suspected partiality of the latter.

The moral Fassin draws from these cases is that, given the deep structures that underlie the sorry state of the world, humanitarianism is no substitute for political struggles against systemic oppression. This conclusion will hardly shock most progressive readers, but it seems especially apt these days because, as he takes pains to show, some of the most intellectually influential thinkers since the 1970s have focused on life in a way that discourages these kinds of struggles. His key example is Michel Foucault, whom Fassin seems to suspect and admire in almost equal measure, but he also takes aim at general modes of ethical thought.

Fassin credits Foucault with inspiring an anthropologist’s plea for the recognition of difference, but Fassin also frames this statement in universalistic terms and around the desire for ethics to begin (again) to think more universally. While human beings experience risk and inequality differently, these conditions remain linked to a set of planetary problems that require planetary solutions. Humanitarianism, which has largely claimed this scale as its own, must be supplanted, or at least inflected, by politics.

The section on the “Ethics of Life,” which tells the story of the Israeli journalist and the Palestinian mother, takes off from this point about the priority of politics— but along the way, Fassin poses questions that he doesn’t pretend he can answer. He queries the persistence in ethical discourse of religious concepts like the value of self-sacrifice, and he seems even more perplexed that our society cannot tolerate the martyrdom of hunger strikers (who, unlike suicide bombers, leave no victims) and will even take extreme precautions to prevent death-row inmates from ending their own lives.

Fassin asks whether the government of South Africa was right to make antiretroviral drugs publicly available, thereby benefiting many, while taking scarce resources away from such basic needs as nutrition and housing. In making this choice, the South African government honored the medical profession’s principle that each life is sacred rather than the political principle that all people should be treated equally and have access to life’s basic necessities. Moreover, as Fassin points out, the steep increase in inequality that followed this reallocation of resources did not receive the same critical attention that the AIDS crisis in South Africa did.

Here, as in all of his examples from around the world, Fassin wants his readers to better understand the ethical logic and political consequences of such choices. At the same time, and more ambitiously, he wants to show a certain universality that carries over from one set of choices to another. While he doesn’t permit himself to declare authoritatively what is right or wrong in any of them, he wants to make a case that ethics and politics can—and, in fact, must—apply across very different situations.

Fassin credits Foucault with inspiring anthropology’s recent interest in ethics, a disciplinary turn that helps explain the existence of his own book. But he also holds Foucault partly responsible for the reluctance of anthropologists to assert any ethical or political claims of their own. Perhaps he is a bit unfair here; after all, this reluctance is also a reaction to the trauma of anthropology’s
early complicity with colonialism and its subsequent desire to withhold judgment, especially regarding non-Western cultures. But he does make an important point: While Foucault and many anthropologists rightly insist that to properly study the practices that form ethical subjects, one needs to find a way to withhold one’s normative commitments in order to understand others’, this also limits our capacity to make moral judgments. Foucault instructed us that norms are assumed to be in the service of the oppressors, so why assert our own? That’s why Foucault left us, Fassin complains, with only an ethics of self-care: the idea of focusing on oneself, not on others. It’s as if he were saying, “I oppress, but I oppress no one but myself.”

In addition to Foucault’s anti-normative bias, Fassin argues that the problem with his understanding of ethics is that it is self-contained, a form of individual self-mastery that is indifferent to the society around it and thus indifferent to politics. Foucault “disconnects the reflexive exercise of creating a moral self from its social conditions of possibility”—or, to put this another way, he is not interested in the social forces that limit the kinds of selves that can be formed. Fassin suggests that new anthropological approaches to ethics oriented around Foucault’s “care of the self” have become too particularistic, and hence blind to the inescapable issue of planetary inequality that Fassin insists should be at the center of any politics or ethics of life. “The word ‘inequality,’” he observes, “does not belong to [Foucault’s] vocabulary.”

Turning from ethics to the local and global structures that create and sustain life, the book’s final section, “Politics of Life,” discusses in a rapid but fascinating survey “the way in which the monetary appreciation of lives developed over the last 2,000 years.” Here, Fassin puts on his anthropologist’s hat to talk about dowry and bride price, considered as payment for a life given in marriage, as well as the widespread premodern traditions of compensation to the victim’s family in cases of murder. But in both sets of examples, he also comes to political conclusions, stressing again how some lives are assumed to have more value than others. The rise of modern law, which supposedly created a formal equality among individuals, marked an improvement on this situation. Yet, as Fassin argues, this formal equality masks other forms of inequality—and not just the chasm between the rich and the poor.

Fassin doesn’t talk much about capitalism in this discussion, but that’s in part because capitalism alone, in his view, doesn’t fully account for inequalities based on race, gender, sexuality, and (a special interest of his) citizenship status.

Bringing this argument into the present, Fassin then takes up the value of lives lost as it was calculated by the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund. The fund’s payments to families, he notes, depended on estimates of what their loved ones would have earned in the future, among other factors, so that poorer families received dramatically less money than rich ones. As a result, great gulfs of inequality emerge even in the wake of someone’s death. The families of women killed in the attack were compensated, on average, at 63 percent of what the families of men received.

Fassin also examines the 9/11 fund in the context of the much lower compensation for victims of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005: with the Oklahoma City bombing, the fact that the enemy was a young white middle-class war veteran who had served in Iraq rendered the building of a common affliction more difficult. Likewise, in Louisiana, the victims were mostly poor black people, which limited the possibility of a shared grief in a country where the contrasting reactions to the disaster revealed the scars of its long history of racism and discrimination.

In the Iraq War, in which US forces killed many Iraqi civilians, intentionally or by mistake, compensation has rarely been awarded to the families—and when it has been, it has averaged about $4,000. By contrast, the total benefits paid to the families of US troops killed in the war “can exceed $800,000,” Fassin notes. “The ratio in terms of what life is worth is 1 to 200.”

These are facts that, to put it mildly, Foucault has not put to use. Foucault has not taught his followers to pick up on, but they are needed to capture the particular character of our era’s planetary inequality. In his book’s concluding section, Fassin argues that Foucault’s much-quoted term “biopolitics” is also partly to blame. The term is unhelpful, Fassin insists, because it is doubly misnamed. Biopolitics, as Foucault understands, is not really about the value or significance of life so much as it is about how life is regimented and governed, nor is it really about politics, which involves struggle against the scandalous inequality of human life and thus can never be reduced to mere governance.

Foucault, Fassin continues, “is interested in the way in which what today seems self-evident emerged—birth control, measurement of mortality, management of public hygiene, control of migration flows—rather than in the social forces at play in this process.” These are all important issues. But for Fassin, politics is about biography as well as biology, about meanings and values as well as those technologies that organize (and often oppress us in) everyday life. One might argue, as I have, that there is more of an overlap between Foucault and Marx than Fassin recognizes here. But there is no doubt that Foucault is reluctant “to incorporate social criticism in his genealogical critique.” Yet this is precisely what Fassin wants anthropology to do.

At the same time, Fassin is by no means a knee-jerk anti-Foucaultian. Like Foucault, he wants to jostle his readers loose from verities that, to them, seem self-evident. For Fassin as well, much of what is dangerously “self-evident” involves the uncritical invocation of the human and the humane. Wary of the invocation of the human on a global scale, as this strain of humanitarianism has so often provided an excuse for military intervention, Fassin is equally suspicious of the so-called post-human movement—inspired by a certain version of environmentalism, as well as by Foucault and his followers—that values life itself over and above (and sometimes against) specifically human life, and thus is liable to wander away from human-centered ethical issues like society’s responsibility to the refugee, or away from ethics as such.

Rather than giving up on humanitarianism, Fassin asks us to keep at it while remembering that such humanitarianism will not help unless it seeks to have an impact on the deep structures that determine whose lives have the most value and who will suffer as a result. Moral economy, in
short, must go hand in hand with political economy.

In Fassin’s 2011 book, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, he accused his fellow French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu of failing to see “that suffering is also a characteristic language of the contemporary world and that compassion has become a political force.” Meanwhile, Fassin criticized Luc Boltanski, another sociologist and strong advocate of humanitarianism, of abandoning “any perspective on the contemporary world.” What Fassin advocates here under the heading of politics—a concept that is crucial enough to his argument to call for some additional elaboration on his part—is forbidden from making either mistake.

A reworking of the distinguished Adorno lectures at the Institute of Social Research at Goethe University, Frankfurt, *Life: A Critical User’s Manual* offers a handy synthesis of the research that Fassin has been conducting for decades on three continents, much of it with migrants and people with AIDS. But the book also gestures toward a synthesis of French and German philosophical thought, the latter having long been much more comfortable in the domain of the universal.

Fassin’s title alludes to Georges Perec’s 1978 novel *Life: A User’s Manual*, which proposes, in 99 chapters grouped around the inhabitants of one Paris apartment building, that each individual life might turn out to be a piece in a huge, invisible jigsaw puzzle. By invoking this humane but extraordinarily complicated novel, Fassin brings Perec’s argument into the world of politics and worries that we are perhaps fed up enough with our puzzling differences to embrace what ties us together. As an anthropologist, he is trained to look for and respect differences, both between cultures and individuals. As a medical doctor, he knows what all human bodies have in common and the mortality that we ultimately face. And as a philosopher, he seems ready to ask whether our infinitely diverse particulars might be gathered up—if not into something universal, then at least in a pattern, into something that might resemble the plot of a novel.

The word “critical,” which Fassin adds to Perec’s title, seems intended to suggest that Fassin has the beginning of an answer to the question Perec leaves more ambiguously unanswered about what holds us together. If so, it’s because the inequality of human lives is the overriding and unbearable condition that, today at least, all of us share.

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**LONG HOURS**

Hardship and hope in the Pacific Northwest

by ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT

In the years that Stephanie Land was a house cleaner, the homes she worked in witnessed the little intimacies of her poverty. She was in the bathroom of one she called the Plant House—a multiroom empty nest filled with the kind of things (greenery, expensive rugs, a piano) she could only dream of affording—when the weight of her circumstances became too much to bear. With her infant child constantly sick and just out of surgery, and feeling the pressure of her long hours and the anxiety of stretching her meager wages across a long list of basic expenses, Land took a moment to break down and cry in the tub. But soon, something about the unattainable house gave her a feeling of consolation. “It had watched me go through its phone book to find churches that might donate funds to help me pay rent after I learned that the waitlist for Section 8 was five years long,” she writes. “That house knew me and I knew it.” This scene from Land’s debut book, *Maid*, touches on both the hopelessness and the inexplicable persistence of poor working parents in America. The book is a memoir, not a journalistic or sociological work, but by virtue of its intimacy and form, it highlights the devastating realities of poverty absent in many more objective studies.

Born from a viral essay that Land wrote for *Vox* in 2015, *Maid* spans the first few years of her life working as a domestic cleaner and relying on public-assistance programs as she raises her daughter, Mia. The story begins with the two moving out of a shelter into
transitional housing not long after they were forced to flee the home they shared with Mia's abusive father. Land becomes a house cleaner, yet despite how hard she works, her wages can't keep up with her expenses, and she becomes a member of America's white working poor. As she and her daughter move through a series of unstable and unsafe housing situations, Land drives to and from mansions across Washington State's Skagit Valley, cleaning the toilets and scrubbing the floors of the area's upper-middle class. “We lived, survived in careful imbalance,” she writes. “This was my unwitnessed existence, as I polished another’s to make theirs appear perfect.”

Much of Maid focuses on Land’s experiences of the labor itself. There’s the physical toll—back injuries, pinched nerves, illness—plus the mental toll of her devalued and invisible toil. As she adapts to the job, the homes become their own idiosyncratic realms—the Plant House, the Sad House, the Porn House—in which Land is able to see a more personal and often pathetic side of her wealthy clients, snotty tissues, hair wads, and all. In writing about the spaces outside her work, though, Land gives shape to the depleting anxiety and isolation that accompany motherhood for millions of Americans in poverty.

Land’s dreams for a better, more uncomplicated future pull her through the tribulations. She wants a stable home, a living wage, and—loftiest goal of all—a chance to move to Montana, attend college, and become a writer. But in the face of child-care fees, heating bills, and expensive rents, these goals seem to be insurmountable challenges. In the end, her life does take a turn that sets her on the path to becoming a published author. But it is not a kind of fairy-tale twist so much as a gradual confluence of good luck. By the time she and her daughter moved to Montana, attend college, and become a writer. But in the face of child-care fees, heating bills, and expensive rents, these goals seem to be insurmountable challenges. In the end, her life does take a turn that sets her on the path to becoming a published author. But it is not a kind of fairy-tale twist so much as a gradual confluence of good luck. By the time she penned the Vox essay, Land had succeeded in moving to Montana, getting her degree, and publishing her writing online, both on her own and through the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.

Informed by direct, lived experience, Maid and other first-person accounts show how our nation’s poor must constantly assert their humanity against regressive social policies and the stigmas they create. Currently, some 40 million Americans live in poverty, with 18.5 million of them in extreme poverty. As Barbara Ehrenreich, who founded the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, points out in the introduction to Maid, this group includes an untold number of female writers whose work will never be produced or reach a wider audience simply because they’re too busy struggling to survive.

Despite being a personal book, Maid covers much of the same ground as other projects looking to convey the day-to-day reality of being poor in the United States. Throughout, Land lays down the ins and outs of her life, revealing her shoestring budgets, how she found housing with Section 8 and Tenant-Based Rental Assistance, how she fed herself and Mia using food stamps and WIC checks, and why—despite working full-time while on government assistance—she never had quite enough to keep her head above water. It’s easy to see how Maid will become a qualitative source for understanding the white working poor.

However, the book’s main strength is in etching out what classist stigma looks like and how it inspires shame. One example it offers concerns buying food—a perennial sticking point in national conversations about what poor people do and do not deserve. In one scene, a man yells “You’re welcome!” at Land as she leaves a checkout counter, having just paid for groceries with a WIC check. Shortly before that, she hears one of her house-cleaning clients comment on seeing a Mexican family using an EBT card while “dressed to the nines.” The interaction shows Land just how much scrutiny and surveillance poor families like hers are constantly under. “I worried about buying items that were either too nice or too frivolous,” she writes. “In the chance I would ever need to get Easter candy or chocolates for Mia’s stocking at Christmas with food-stamp money, I’d go late at night, using the self-checkout.” It’s an experience of internalization that no quantitative data or secondhand accounts could possibly convey; it is also an example of the kind of shame that Americans who have always lived comfortable lives need to begin to understand.

When it comes to poverty, there are some things that can be known and told only by someone who’s actually lived it. Ehrenreich pointed out as much in Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, her 2000 investigative account of what it’s like living in the United States while working at minimum-wage jobs. “There was no way I was going to ‘experience poverty’ or find out how it ‘really feels’ to be a long-term low-wage worker,” she writes. Ehrenreich explains her project as a journalistic experiment to see if she can do what “the truly poor attempt to do every day” and financially survive. She recounts her efforts via first-person narratives, rundowns of her wages and expenses, corresponding research from government reports and news sources, as well as personal takes on things like her co-workers and their working conditions.

Still, there’s only so much a middle-class person can see or understand about being poor in America. When Ehrenreich works as a house cleaner, she can’t exactly ask her co-workers how poor they are, and so she has to make educated guesses based on workplace conversations and general price estimates. Later, she wonders what long-term poverty does to the soul, if it creates a “repetitive injury of the spirit.”

What is noticeable (and also contributes to the book’s sharpness) is the buoyancy with which Ehrenreich moves through her project: Unlike Land, her own stakes for failing at her experiment were low. She writes knowing that she has another, more stable and pleasurable life to go back to whenever she decides that her research is done. Nickel and Dimed showed millions of Americans what it’s like to piece together an income on the lowest rungs of the job ladder, but the stigma of being poor—an integral aspect of poverty—is absent, having been outside the author’s focus or range of access.

The study of poverty and its effects doesn’t necessarily have to be stymied by objectivity or methodical research. To write his 2017 book Evicted, which examined housing and eviction in Milwaukee, the sociologist Matthew Desmond moved to the city’s North Side. He was careful to ensure that his subjectivity didn’t intrude on the book, instead diligently recounting the experiences of the people he shadowed. In his explanation of the project, he writes: “I hope that when you talk about this book, you talk first about [the people in it], and the fact that somewhere in your city, a family has just been evicted from their home.” The statement rightfully points to the wealth of humanizing detail that Desmond provides in Evicted. Still, I couldn’t help wondering about the interior experiences of his subjects, such as the internalized
In the 1992 Robert Zemeckis film Death Becomes Her, Meryl Streep plays an aging actress who buys an elixir of youth from a powerful witch. Once the actress quaffs the glowing pink liquid, her skin unwrinkles, her age spots melt away, and her figure perks up. She passes a mirror on her way out of the witch’s castle and, upon seeing her rejuvenated body for the first time, squeals in delight, “I’m a girl!”

On Angel-Ho’s new album, also called Death Becomes Her, the Cape Town vocalist and producer echoes that line with a similar glee: “I can be your girl / In a stony world / I’ll be your girl / I am your girl,” she sings, her voice lifting in an ebullient rush on the final word. She also adds a possessive pronoun to Meryl’s exclamation and walks it through multiple tenses: I can be… I will be… I am.

A box-office disaster, Zemeckis’s film found a second life on the cult circuit, earning a dedicated queer fan base with its campy depictions of vicious femininity. It’s one of the few Hollywood movies to posit femininity as a lofty ideal that all women, cis or otherwise, must asymptotically pursue. The movie accepts that there’s nothing natural or inevitable about being a girl: It’s something you fight for, tooth and nail. Similarly, Angel-Ho’s Death Becomes Her celebrates the often unacknowledged process of deliberate change behind that embodiment of “the girl.” Angel-Ho has spoken of the album as a document of “killing the old self” and “assuming my trans goddess”—excising what doesn’t fit, exalting what does.

She’s been working toward this point for some time. Her 2015 EP Ascension, Sasha Geffen writes for Pitchfork, Rolling Stone, and NPR. They are at work on their first book, on the history of pop music and gender nonconformity.
n a recent interview, Angel-Ho noted a desire to expand the reach of her work, to give her new album a pop sound. “I was tired of making music that was only received by underground experimental music heads,” she said. “I wanted my music to be received universally.” Pop moments do gleam throughout the record; over restless and occasionally acerbic synthesizers, Angel-Ho navigates desire and joy in pop’s language of pleasure. Her voice bubbles and snaps on “Like a Girl,” multitracked to the point that she sounds like an entire girl group. Later, on “Muse to You,” she raps with an irreverent sneer and sings through a plastic vocal filter, roboticizing herself. “Dance around like Britney / Gimme more!” she demands on “Pose,” citing the millennium’s pop goddess at her most human: a lackluster 2007 performance at the VMAs where Spears danced perfunctorily, missed her steps, and barely lip-synced along to her single “Gimme More,” as if she couldn’t give a damn who was watching.

Amid a jumble of synth sounds on “Live,” Angel-Ho briefly quotes the Bee Gees’ most famous song: “Ha, ha, ha, ha / Stayin’ alive / Stayin’ alive!” The citation arrives in the middle of one of the album’s most idiosyncratic tracks: All the elements of a traditional pop song are present but disjointed. A detuned bass line arcs out into empty space. Instead of a four-on-the-floor drum beat, a distant metallic shuffle keeps loose time. And then Angel-Ho quotes that most sanitized of disco songs, a hit manufactured by a fading folk-rock band seeking to capitalize on a musical sensation birthed in primarily black and queer spaces. If the Bee Gees pilfered the new and strange for their own ends, Angel-Ho drags their enduring hook back into a strange new world of her own. Angel-Ho’s claim that she intends Death Becomes Her to have universal appeal rings oddly at first, given the often unrecognizable shapes of these songs. And yet by deploying the word “universal,” she is not simply suggesting that she has aimed her music at the Top 40; she is inscribing the terms of her own universe. With Death Becomes Her, Angel-Ho reorients pop language toward a process of surprise and constant becoming. The platitudes of straight music fall away; no easy choruses or comfortable resolutions arrive to soothe the listener. With a nimble hand, Angel-Ho forges together jagged musical fragments. Her universe does not unfurl according to grand machinations of authority, but stitches itself together with impeccable playfulness and collective spontaneity, one jumbled beat at a time.
Puzzle No. 3498
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

1  Eggs without salt for one possibly destined to be a queen (4)
3  Prince sat uneasily with hankering to hold gun (10)
10  Before spring, post office’s accommodating popular software (9)
11  Soldier breaks lock, nearly making sense (5)
12  Set operating room back with 3, for example (5)
13  Far-traveling explorers in Oregon with rabid beasts, maybe (8)
16, 21, 5, and 28D  Printer (drunken pig) to talk with that woman (12)
18  One thing the president gets to fill: a structural component of furniture? (7,4)
20  Radium swallowed by second-best dinosaur (11)
21  See 16
22  Having no particular goal, libertarian icon splits atom (2,6)
24  Havana resident’s embargo on copper? (5)
27  Capture part of “Glass Onion” (5)
28  Salutes Mel endlessly in hard comedown? (9)
29  Someone who steers a boat containing farm animal and initially twitchy dog (3,7)
30  God’s canal running westward (4)

DOWN

1  Wrongdoer consumed by taste for picnic item (5,5)
2  Allen to court woman missing Los Angeles (5)
4  Educational authority, after Sunday, sounding doubly uninterested (6,5)
5  See 16
6  Parker is involved in medieval etymology (5)
7  Stripy insect is drastically more tight (5,4)
8  Discovered Schumer is a Finn (4)
9  Coil fell off where a hair might grow (8)
14  Smack as an alternative for central Eastern city in New England (6,5)
15  For instance, Marilyn Monroe and Fred Astaire with same agents? Weird (5,5)
17  Full of desire to move first of seven over 9 (a perfect square) (6-3)
19  Potential precedent: use police weapon around satanic sect (4,4)
23  Make amends after lunch, perhaps (5)
25  Loudly shows disapproval for alcohol (5)
26  Miracle formula includes musical symbol (4)
28  See 16

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3497

ACROSS

1 PENNY + FAR THING
9 TY (lip/GE-OM) 10 EXA (rev.) + MINE
11 MET + R[0][1][0] + 12 NORTHEAST (word anagram) 13 2 def. 14 T + Wide letter bank
15 PALIMPSEST (pastel anagram)
19 S + CUD 22 aug. 25 & 16 EMIL (rev.)
20 Y/D/C (cy anagram) + KIN + SON
21 L/E/L/X/R/S (rev. ang.)
27 “said D” sporemycon 28 letter bank

DOWN

1 FOT OMAG (rev.) 2 NIGHT + T (Fall)
3 YOO + “who” 4 ANT + ON (Chekhov)
5 THERM (ang.) + REEP (rev.)
6 5 E/NAO (H + I.E. (rev.)
7 G/R/P/E (e.g. rev.) 8 SEU/TITLE
15 WAS + 11 + BAS IN 17 aug.
18 PL-[sun] OVER 20 DA YCAR (rev.) + E
21 IN-(i)-AL 23 “pi, phi”
24 OHE + GE

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