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— J. Fitzgerald, VA
True colors: Protesters march against Colombian President Iván Duque’s administration on May 5 as part of a general strike.
N MAY 5 THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION DID THE TRULY UNEXPECTED. BUCKING the gigantic pharmaceutical lobby in Washington, it sided with low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) by supporting a waiver provision to the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) that would set aside some intellectual property rights in order to expand the production of Covid-19 vaccines, which are now manufactured primarily by only a handful of companies in the world’s richest nations.

While this TRIPS waiver alone will not be sufficient to ramp up vaccine production to immunize everyone on the planet, it is a crucial first step. We also need tech transfer; companies like Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson must step up and help manufacturers in LMICs set up facilities and processes to make the vaccines the world needs. Think of it this way: The TRIPS waiver says the “recipe” must be shared; tech transfer is Julia Child coming to your house to show you how to make that very complicated new dish.

In addition, we’re going to need adequate resources to get this work done—getting truly global vaccine production on line will require subsidies by richer nations. Luckily, $16 billion is sitting unused in the US Treasury right now, appropriated in the American Rescue Act for vaccine-related efforts just like this.

The TRIPS waiver has been vociferously opposed by the pharmaceutical industry and its allies in the Biden administration and in Congress, like Democratic Senator Chris Coons. It has also been criticized by some in the US global health establishment, a few legal scholars, and a number of economists. They have all made essentially the same arguments: Patents are not the problem; these vaccines are too complicated for others to make; and a waiver risks killing the innovation goose that laid the golden egg. Sharing this intellectual property, they claim, will destroy any incentive for companies to develop vaccines in the future.

Where have we heard all this before? A little over 20 years ago, when those in LMICs struggling to save lives during the AIDS epidemic suggested that poorer countries should be allowed to break patents in order to import and export generic versions of antiretroviral drugs, the Clinton-Gore administration sided with the pharmaceutical industry, putting one of those countries—South Africa—on the Special 301 Watch List of countries under scrutiny for possible intellectual property violations. Others claimed that providing AIDS drugs to Africa was impossible not because of the complexity of their manufacture but because of the primitive nature of the health systems on the continent, suggesting that Africans couldn’t tell time or adhere to medication schedules. When Thailand indicated that it would invoke a compulsory license on patented antiretroviral drugs, allowing the import of their generic equivalents, the pharmaceutical industry’s allies hyperventilated, arguing that this move would end medical innovation: If this trend grows, they warned, the world can say goodbye to the next AIDS cure.

How have those claims held up? South Africa now has the world’s largest HIV treatment program, the US pharmaceutical industry is thriving, and generic medications are the mainstay of AIDS drug supplies in LMICs.

Those facts won’t stop this latest victory of need over greed from being met with howls of protest from the industry. Big Pharma will act to tilt the negotiations over the TRIPS waiver to its advantage at all costs. We must keep an eye on the drafting of those documents to ensure they are transparent and open to public scrutiny. However, we are at the start of a race to vaccinate the entire world, and there are larger tasks to accomplish—particularly a massive tech transfer and industrial scale-up. The effort to vaccinate as many people as we can as the virus tries to outpace us is the most urgent global priority of our time. India has exploded in a firestorm of death and suffering due to Covid-19, but that may be just a prologue for the infernos to come across an unvaccinated planet. Business as usual—for Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson—may suit their private interests, but at a time of unprecedented crisis, it is wholly inadequate to the challenge that faces us. Yes, we’ve had a small victory in getting the United States to support the TRIPS waiver. But we cannot let our guard down.

Gregg Gonsalves is an assistant professor of epidemiology at the Yale School of Public Health.
Urgent Care

Republican attacks on Biden’s big proposals aren’t working.

LAILING REPUBLICANS ARE HAVING A HARD TIME figuring out how to oppose President Joe Biden’s popular proposals. They couldn’t stop the American Rescue Plan, targeted at helping the nation recover from the pandemic. Now Biden is pushing a big infrastructure bill that includes some old-fashioned priorities Abraham Lincoln would have recognized, especially rail, but also some things, like broadband and long-term care, that Lincoln, bless him, might not have imagined. Dwight Eisenhower built out the interstate highway system, but he couldn’t see broadband coming either.

Republicans tried to make the argument that the bill goes beyond its proper scope as an “infrastructure” measure. But polling shows that the pushback hasn’t worked very well. The proposals are popular, some measures more than others, some even with Republicans. So are the proposals in Biden’s American Families Plan, which would expand child tax credits and provide universal 3K and pre-K, free community college, and paid family leave. So the new GOP arguments aren’t looking at the American present or future; they’re looking way back.

Fifty years ago, the US Congress overwhelmingly passed a bill that could have made many of the proposals in Biden’s American Families Plan unnecessary. The 1971 Comprehensive Child Development Act would have made a $2 billion investment in a vast expansion of state-funded preschool and child care programs. Sponsored by the late Senator Walter Mondale, based on months if not years of research and legislative arm-wrestling, it had remarkable bipartisan support.

For a while, it seemed possible that President Richard Nixon would sign it. In a speech to employees at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, he said all the right things: “What happens to the child from a nutritional standpoint, from an educational standpoint, from an environmental standpoint in the years between 1 and 5 may affect that child for the balance of his life regardless of what may happen after that time.” In fact, Nixon’s staff had helped draft the bill.

But Nixon vetoed it anyway. What happened? In part, my long-ago Hardball buddy Pat Buchanan happened. Aware that Nixon was open to signing the bill, he hit him with, for Nixon, an insult too deep to reject: The bill had its origins, Buchanan claimed, in Soviet Russia.

It was ridiculous. Yes, in 1929, a Soviet sociologist claimed that the traditional family “will be sent to a museum of antiquities so that it can rest next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe, by the horse-drawn carriage, the steam engine, and the wired telephone.” Forty-two years later, Buchanan knew that hadn’t happened. But he had visited Soviet day care centers, and he described his horror: “We went to see the Young Pioneers, where these little kids four, five, and six years old were being instructed in Leninist doctrine, reciting it the way I used to recite Catechism when I was in the first grade,” he said.

Buchanan got to Nixon and greased the veto. “Good public policy requires that we enhance rather than diminish both parental authority and parental involvement with children,” Nixon’s stinging veto message said. “For the Federal government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach.” Congress could not override his veto, and the bill died. A top Mondale aide told NPR in 2016, dejectedly, about the veto: “It totally surprised us.”

Today Biden faces a brigade of Buchanans lamenting his proposals as “social engineering.” Insurrection-supporting Senator Josh Hawley denounced “lefty social engineering paid for by mortgaging the future of my children and my grandchildren.” Senator Marsha Blackburn argued in a Fox Business Network interview that the proposals would “incentivize women to rely on the federal government to organize their lives.” Later that night, she tweeted a link to a 1974 New York Times story about the prevalence of affordable child care in the Soviet Union, adding, “You know who else liked universal day care.”

Hillbilly venture capitalist and amateur philosopher J.D. Vance, who is reportedly considering a run for one of Ohio’s Senate seats, insisted that Biden’s proposal put the “preferences of our ruling-class elites” above those of average Americans. “They want strangers to raise their kids, but middle-class Americans, whatever their station in life, want more time with their children,” he said. Well, as a wealthy venture capitalist, he would know what elites want. Not so much his potential constituents.

I didn’t want “strangers” to raise my kids; I wanted some help, because I needed to work. When I read things like that, I realize Vance knows fewer parents who struggle with balancing work and child care than I do. We need these programs now more than ever, because during the pandemic, the labor-force participation of women with children has dropped sharply. That’s hurting women, their families, and the economy. If Democrats don’t steamroll these Republican objections, they’re facing a session in which they can’t prove to voters that the Democratic Party can improve their lives. And that would mean we’ll almost certainly wind up with a GOP House and Senate next year.

The new GOP arguments aren’t looking at the American present or future; they’re stuck in the past.
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COMMENT/KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Monopoly Money

Hey, Google, your predatory pricing has put independent journalism at risk. That’s why we’re suing.

I came to The Nation as an intern at the start of the Reagan years, and edited the magazine from 1995 to 2019. I am deeply committed to my role as steward of this remarkable institution, and I am determined to bring it into the 21st century. But that task has proven increasingly challenging.

Not that being at the helm of The Nation has been without exciting opportunities. Digital publishing and social media have given us the chance to reach vastly larger audiences at home and globally. We’ve embraced enormous changes: from the computer to the in-box to the cell phone to the social media feed. We’ve grown with savvy—and humility—as we’ve found new ways of expanding our voice.

But the playing field is not level. Like other publications, we have seen advertising dollars dwindle and watched the social media and tech giants wield enormous power over our content, traffic, and revenue. In these turbulent times, The Nation has never wavered in its commitment to producing the highest quality journalism—journalism that informs our readers and shapes a more equitable, just, and radical future.

We will not cede that future to anyone—especially predatory digital behemoths.

That’s why we’re suing Google.

The Nation relies on a business model that depends not only on advertising dollars but on the generosity of our subscribers and donors. That community model has expanded to include a travel program, the Nation Shop, and our popular events series, Conversations With The Nation. We invest all proceeds into our journalism. We run a lean operation; every dollar counts. But we still depend on advertising, and Google has stifled competition and siphoned off precious revenue.

Some more context: Publishers sell remnant advertising space on their websites through real-time auctions in what is called the display advertising marketplace. Small- and medium-size outfits will use intermediary agents to match with advertisers through an auction-like process. But for some time, Google’s Ad Server has been excluding bids submitted through rival networks in order to prioritize business from its own Ad Network.

Last December, we joined The Progressive and Genius Media Group, Inc., to file an antitrust lawsuit that challenges this monopolistic behavior.

Through its anticompetitive conduct, Google has erected a toll bridge between publishers and advertisers, and it charges an unlawfully high price for passage. If Google’s drive to control the markets related to display advertising is left unchecked, it will have the power to decide which publishers live and which die.

This is no ordinary lawsuit—it is about the future of independent media. It is about valuing the producers, publishers, and creators in our country. It is about recognizing that the only way to ensure the future of journalism is to fight for it.

Principled. Progressive. Passionate. It’s what we stand for. We would not be here were it not for the fierce loyalty of our readers, and we’re grateful to be in this struggle with you.
Objection!
Elie Mystal

Juvenile Judgment

A recent Supreme Court decision shows that Brett Kavanaugh remains “permanently incorrigible.”

In 2005, Brett Jones, a 15-year-old white kid from Mississippi, was convicted of murder. Jones claimed self-defense, but a jury found him guilty of murdering his 67-year-old grandfather, with whom he lived. Jones was sentenced to life without parole, the mandatory sentence in Mississippi at that time. Later, in the 2012 case Miller v. Alabama, the Supreme Court ruled that mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles were unconstitutional. Jones appealed his sentence, but the judge again sent him away for life without parole, this time noting he was doing so despite the option of offering a lighter sentence.

In 2016, the Supreme Court issued a follow-up decision making Miller retroactive for those who had been sentenced before the case was heard. The justices reiterated that “a lifetime in prison is a disproportionate sentence for all but the rarest of children, those whose crimes reflect ‘irreparable corruption.’” (The legal term of art is “permanent incorrigibility,” which allows judges to sound like they’re debating whether Tom Sawyer should be sent to bed without dinner.) In light of that additional ruling, Jones again appealed his sentence. This time his case made it all the way to the Supreme Court. But the court ruled that Jones, now 32, should stay in prison for the rest of his life without the possibility of parole.

The justice who wrote that opinion condemning a man to life in prison for a crime he had committed before he finished high school was the same justice who was accused of trying to rape a girl while he was in high school: Brett Kavanaugh.

The first thing that strikes you about Kavanaugh’s opinion is the nerve of the thing. The ruling against Jones was 6-3, with all of the conservatives sticking together. Their reasoning: There is no requirement that judges engage in actual fact-finding to determine “incorrigibility” before sending a juvenile away forever. Any one of those conservatives could have written the majority ruling. For Chief Justice John Roberts to assign this case to Kavanaugh, and for him to accept that assignment, is just part of the long-term conservative project to pretend that Kavanaugh’s checkered and disgusting past does not exist.

But Kavanaugh does have a past, and knowledge of his predatory baggage is impossible to memory-hole as you read his opinion weighing Jones’s fate. Every argument Kavanaugh made in his own defense at his confirmation hearing should have redounded to Jones’s benefit in this case. Kavanaugh, you’ll remember, asked to be judged by the man he’s become—the high school girls’ basketball coach who hires women as his law clerks—not the beer-loving alleged attempted high school rapist he was. He argued, in angry, sneering tones, that his youthful indiscretions (the ones he admitted to, at least) should not bar him from getting a lifetime job. But having been gifted that lifetime power, he turned around and argued that Jones’s youth was no bar at all to a lifetime of imprisonment.

In his opinion, Kavanaugh tries to distract from his obvious moral hypocrisy by suggesting, ever so mildly, that he may not have agreed with the actual sentence but was merely bound by his interpretation of the role of the court to uphold it. He wrote that his opinion should not be taken as “agreement or disagreement” with the sentence, then distanced himself still further by adding that “broad moral and policy judgments” should be left to the states. Kavanaugh has a habit of doing this in his opinions: making bad decisions and then adding language suggesting he was just going along with the crowd.

But Kavanaugh couldn’t remain consistent for a full calendar week on whether the federal court should weigh in on the appropriateness of punishments issued by local and state institutions. Mere days after the court published his opinion in the Jones case, it heard oral arguments in the case of Brandi Levy. Levy, then 14, had failed to make her high school varsity cheerleading squad. She went home and posted a picture on Snapchat with the comment “Fuck school fuck softball fuck cheer fuck everything.”

Aside from the lack of commas, I don’t see why the school would have a problem with this, but the cheerleading coach saw the post and suspended Levy from the junior varsity cheerleading team for the rest of the year.

It’s a Supreme Court case because of the First Amendment issues at play, but during the oral arguments Kavanaugh spent most of his time clutching his pearls over the severity of the punishment. He said, “So maybe what bothers me when I read all this is that it didn’t seem like the punishment was tailored to the offense.”

To recap: Kavanaugh is deeply con-
concerned about a local school suspending a kid from cheerleading practice but can do nothing about a local court sending a kid to jail for life without parole.

I wonder if Kavanaugh’s opinion in the Jones case would have changed had Kavanaugh been accused of stabbing somebody instead of trying to rape somebody at a beach party? Because the only through line I can find in Kavanaugh’s approach to juvenile punishment seems to be whether or not he can put himself in the shoes of the accused delinquent. He can understand kids who get drunk or cheerleaders who curse or dudes who sexually assault. Some of these were his own experiences growing up, and he recoils at the thought of consequences or accountability for those actions. He recognizes Levy’s experience.

The Jones case is happening to somebody else. Jones was a poor kid from a dysfunctional home. Kavanaugh likely didn’t know kids like Jones, much less hang out with them, and so the moral outrage he brought to his own confirmation hearing or the Levy oral arguments never shows up here. Instead of grand pronouncements about how adults should treat kids who are troubled, which he made during the Levy arguments, Kavanaugh offered only raw statistics about the number of juveniles who commit murder in his Jones opinion.

Kavanaugh closes his opinion by telling Jones to plead his case for clemency to the “state legislature, state courts, or Governor.” It’s another classic Kavanaugh move. He’s always happy to sidestep responsibility. That’s just the permanently incorrigible man he’s become.

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To prepare for writing about Jordan Peterson, I asked numerous people I know what they thought of him. They all gave the same answer: “Who?”

Friends, where have you been? Peterson’s 2018 book, 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos, sold 5 million copies and has been slated for translation into 50 languages. His YouTube channel has 3.68 million subscribers.

According to the man himself, he is so famous that a waiter recognized him in a restaurant and thanked him for changing his life, which cannot be said, I’m guessing, for any other clinical psychologist in the world, or possibly any other Canadian.

This is quite an achievement for one whose work is crammed with references to Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, the Bible, ancient Mesopotamian deities, Jesus, and Jung, and which, under a lot of sexist, conservative, mythological/biblical/evolutionary-animal-behavior folderol, basically tells men to grow up and grow a pair. Work hard, be responsible, demand more of yourself, make your bed. Peterson dragged that simple message out for 370 pages of unbelievably clothed, dreary prose, proving once again that your creative-writing teachers were wrong: Nobody cares about the quality of the writing if the message is what the reader wants to hear. Apparently there are a lot of men (most of his fans are men) who want to be told exactly how to stop making such a mess of their lives (Rule 1: “Stand up straight with your shoulders back”) and also that human beings are a lot like lobsters, programmed for hierarchy and combat. You can buy “Hail Lobster” T-shirts, pillows, limited-edition neckties, and even smartphone covers on his website. Scientists have said he’s got lobsters all wrong, but whatever. I will never feel guilty about eating a lobster roll again.

You might think 12 rules were enough—by Rule 12, “Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street,” Peterson seemed to be reaching a bit. He obviously didn’t think so, because his new book, Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life, offers a dozen more and weighs in at 432 pages. Preorders made it reach Amazon’s Top 10.

Why would so many people want to be hectored by an unpleasant know-it-all whose most recent contribution as a public intellectual was advocating an all-meat diet? The rules are mostly familiar self-help platitudes, which Peterson drags out for dozens of pages each by bringing in everything from his patients and family to ISIS, Osiris, and Tolstoy. Rule 7: “Work as hard as you possibly can on at least one thing and see what happens.” Rule 10: “Plan and work diligently to maintain the ro-
How can American cities promote racial equity, end redlining, and reverse the damaging health- and wealth-related effects of segregation?

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mance in your relationship.” Rule 12: “Be grateful in spite of your suffering.” There are plenty of cats out there for you to pet.

There have always been men who want to be told exactly what to do to get what they want—in this case, women. Men, you may have noticed, have had a harder time getting quality girlfriends now that women don’t have to marry to survive. They have to make more of an effort to be boyfriend material, let alone husband material, and this is not easy for the ones who think a beautiful, complaisant helpmeet should be handed to them on a platter. At worst, these young men become incels, raging at both feminists and alpha men who corner all the pretty ladies. Peterson shares their pain. He’s said some unwise things about how “enforced monogamy” would solve the problem, by which he did not mean the government doling out wives, as is sometimes claimed, but restoring social pressures to marry. (Good luck with that.) But he is also their drill sergeant: Clean your room. Be good at your job. Life is tough, but remember Rule 11: “Do not allow yourself to become resentful, deceitful, or arrogant.”

Not surprisingly, Peterson takes a dim view of feminism. Basically, he believes all women want to have babies—they just don’t want to have them with a manbaby. This contradiction—patriarchy is good, but men are flubbing it—leads him into all kinds of strange places. Famously, he contends that symbolically, men represent order, women chaos. Really? Shouldn’t that be the other way around? Who, after all, is cleaning and tidying, cooking, reorganizing the fridge, remembering to pick up the dry cleaning and send out birthday cards and put the parent-teacher conference on the calendar—usually while holding down a job as well? Compare the apartments of single men and women in their 20s: Which sex is sleeping on sheets that haven’t been changed in three months? Maybe men were orderly in the distant past, for example when they served in the Roman army—all that building of forts and organizing of equipment Julius Caesar wrote about, to say nothing of keeping one’s armor and weaponry polished and ready for action. But today? There’s a reason why a young man who fails to launch is described as living in Mom’s basement. Good old Mom. She probably still does his laundry.

I have no doubt that some people have been goaded into self-improvement by Peterson. He is quite right that people—women as well as men—need meaning and purpose in their lives, need to find things they care about and to try their hardest to be good at them. Caught between the belief that they deserve to move forward without having to compete with pesky women, and the fact that the milestones of adulthood, like marriage and parenthood, may be economically out of reach, men can find it hard to resist cheap cynicism. But like it or not, we are social beings, so Rule 1: “Do not carelessly denigrate social institutions or creative achievement.” Fortunately for the sarcastic among us, “carelessly” leaves a lot of wiggle room.

When it comes to stern and sober life advice, the best book is still Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations, which has been guiding people through the struggles of life for at least a thousand years and is, moreover, well-written and short. Its advice can be summarized as follows. Rule 1: Try as hard as you can to be a good, responsible, serious person. Rule 2: Be aware that much of life is out of your control. Rule 3: In any case, soon you will be dead.
A consistent theme of the post-mortems on the failed union drive at Amazon’s warehouse in Bessemer, Ala., is that the organizers just weren’t ready to take on the tech behemoth. If the labor movement is going to beat a corporate giant, the argument goes, it needs to be smarter and more strategic. It must provide organizers with new and better skills and more carefully pick and choose the sites of its campaigns. To win a single-site union vote or even a broader one against a regional employer, this may be true. But organizing Amazon is taking aim at the core of the global economy. It’s the kind of campaign in which victory could spark a labor surge that brings millions of people into unions and shifts the balance of workplace power for generations. And these sorts of fights rarely happen at the time and place of our choosing.

In Bessemer, disgruntled employees reached out to a local union that had recently notched some big wins; it was what we in the labor movement call a “hot shop.” And the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union did what it could to control the terrain and timing of the campaign, but existing labor law makes that nearly impossible. Still, organizers should take on these potentially paradigm-shifting struggles wherever they emerge—even if they lose more often than they win.

Successful movements grow out of these sorts of failures. We celebrate, for example, the civil rights victories of the Birmingham campaign in 1963 but rarely discuss how the seeds of this success were planted in a failed desegregation campaign two years earlier in Albany, Ga.

As the National Labor Relations Board adjudicates the RWDSU’s accusations that Amazon illegally interfered with the vote, we can draw inspiration from the workers in Bessemer and turn their very public loss to labor’s advantage.

From The New York Times’ live vote ticker to the edge-of-your-seat coverage in the business press and mainstream media, I have never seen a union drive receive so much attention. The whole country saw how the vote pitted a mostly Black, low-wage workforce against one of the wealthiest corporations in the world. People saw how the government agencies charged with protecting workers’ right to organize were unable to prevent an all-out assault on a free and fair election. People
saw Amazon draw from the standard anti-union playbook (captive-audience meetings, expensive union-busting consultants, coercion) while adding some of its own innovations: installing a mailbox on company property, surveilling workers on a second-to-second basis, and even changing the traffic-light pattern outside the warehouse to make it harder to canvass workers. This campaign was a master class on the need for labor law reform, and we can use the Bessemer union drive to show the public the importance of the Protecting the Right to Organize Act currently making its way through the Senate.

While employers with the wealth and power of Amazon will always try to prevent their workers from organizing, the PRO Act would ban some of the tactics used in Bessemer. Employers, for instance, would no longer be able to change the size of the bargaining unit (the group of workers who qualify to be in the union) in the lead-up to an election. In Bessemer, Amazon insisted on a size almost four times as large as the one the workers claimed. The union had to try to organize thousands of new workers just as the anti-union campaign was heating up. While this campaign generated opinions from all corners, it has had another significant effect: raising the profile of other organizing efforts at Amazon. We’ve seen Teamsters leaders from California to Iowa debating recognition strikes, job actions from Amazonians United in Chicago, and a renewed interest in the organizing efforts at the Twin Cities’ Awood Center, whose largely East African workers have led multiple strikes at Amazon warehouses and won significant concessions from management in recent years.

None of these efforts will succeed on their own, but in the wake of the Bessemer campaign, we can begin to see the contours of what worker power at Amazon might look like. We won’t get there through a perfectly staffed and centrally coordinated strategy. Multiple lines will need to converge at key moments. To confront corporate domination, we will need international solidarity as well as support from local communities. We need those fighting for Black lives and environmental justice to make worker rights central to their battles. We will need public officials willing to stand on the side of human rights, and we will need workers in facilities around the country to act together. There is no single tactic that will make this movement succeed, but the courageous workers in Bessemer have surely opened the door to many future efforts. Bessemer was just one fight, and there will be many more ahead. One thing is clear: Only a fighting labor movement can grow, and so it’s up to us to build on what happened and create opportunities for even bolder activity, not to shrink from the challenge and wait for the ideal circumstances that may never come.

Alex Han is a longtime union organizer in Chicago.

Organizers should take on these potentially paradigm-shifting struggles wherever they emerge.

Superficial campaigns only give credence to the notion that unions are third parties.

Adam Ryan is a worker-organizer at Target Corporation and founder of Target Workers Unite.
The *gilets jaunes*, or yellow vests, demonstrate on May Day in Paris. More than 106,000 people marched in about 300 rallies in France, according to the Interior Ministry. Protesters held placards making various demands for social and economic justice, but many focused their anger on President Emmanuel Macron’s changes to unemployment benefits, which are set to go into effect in July.

**By the Numbers**

- **17k**: Number of police officers in Latin America trained since 2013 through USCAP, a joint US-Colombian program
- **3.8M**: Amount Colombia will pay for riot control gear for ESMAD, a police unit accused of using excessive force and sexual violence against demonstrators
- **47**: Minimum number of protesters killed by state forces in Colombia since protests began at the end of April
- **$37M**: Amount the US allocated from 2014 to 2017 to train officers in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, countries where security forces have been accused of human rights abuses and corruption
- **60k**: Number of people who have graduated, across 85 countries, from one of five US International Law Enforcement Academies over the past 20 years
- **367**: Number of people killed by police in the US in 2021—Jared Olson

**Why Trump Still Insists That He Won the Election**

He calls people losers so he can’t be one. The thought of that label just makes him undone. But history’s verdict won’t be any finer: He’s not just a loser but also a whiner.
Raising the Bar

The California prosecutors who want to keep people out of jail.
POLITICS IS OFTEN DEFINED OR UNDERSTOOD AS THE ART OF MAKING a deal. But I think, at its best, it’s the art of making possible tomorrow that which we can’t even imagine today,” says Chesa Boudin, the district attorney of San Francisco County. The son of two members of the Weather Underground sentenced to long spells in prison, Boudin was narrowly elected in 2019 under San Francisco’s ranked-choice voting system. He talks of the pain of growing up with imprisoned parents; of the collect calls he still receives every Saturday from his incarcerated father; and of his belief, inculcated in him from childhood, that simply locking people up is a failure of the political imagination. “My personal experience shapes me—my worldview, my fears and hopes, my dreams and aspirations,” he acknowledges.

Boudin and three other district attorneys—Republican Tori Verber Salazar of San Joaquin County, in the Central Valley (whose office didn’t respond to requests for comment for this article), and Democrats George Gascón of Los Angeles and Diana Becton of Contra Costa County—joined the Prosecutors Alliance of California in September 2020. Although their offices serve only four of the 58 counties in California, they represent more than 30 percent of the state’s population. The organization was established as a progressive alternative to the more conservative California District Attorneys Association (CDAA), which, for decades, has helped shape criminal justice priorities in the Golden State. In 2022, when 56 of those counties hold elections for their DAs, the number of Californians served by self-identifying progressive prosecutors could well reach the 50 percent mark.

Regarding his own philosophy of criminal justice and his belief that a prosecutor’s office shouldn’t be a prisoner-manufacturing machine, Boudin continues, “It requires the courage to be ahead of your time, the confidence to take risks, and drawing on not one ideology or dogma, but being constantly aware of the limits of our knowledge and experience.”

The changes in criminal justice priorities taking place up and down the West Coast—primarily, though not exclusively, in its big cities—make for one of the most extraordinary, head-spinning political stories of the past decade. The prosecution systems of the largest metropolitan regions of the West are being run by men and women who speak the language of racial justice fluently, who are deeply opposed to mass incarceration and believe they should be judged on whether they can lower—not increase—the number of prisoners in their jurisdictions.

Our hundred miles to the south, Gascón, Boudin’s predecessor in San Francisco, was elected DA of Los Angeles County in an upset this past November. He has been pushing his prosecutors to limit sentencing enhancements, death penalty prosecutions, “three strikes and you’re out” convictions, trying juveniles as adults, and other vestiges of the decades-long wars on crime and drugs. In March, Gascón’s office reported a 71 percent reduction in the use of sentencing enhancements between December 2020 and February 2021, compared with the same period the previous year.

“We’re reducing incarceration levels by thousands of years and billions of dollars in costs,” he explains. “We have all come to the conclusion that mass incarceration has increased systemic racism and hasn’t necessarily contributed to the safety of our communities.”

Gascón, who recently (and very publicly) resigned from the conservative California District Attorneys Association, acknowledges the high level of pushback he has received from the prosecutors within his own office; some have threatened to resign in response to his directives. But he believes that the public is with him. “You have a group of people who for the last decade have been fighting every reform effort, and they’ve been losing,” Gascón says. “Frankly, I think they’re becoming irrelevant.”

Not surprisingly, those words don’t sit well with many of his peers. For Vern Pierson, the district attorney of El Dorado County and president of the CDAA, Gascón is engaging in dangerous posturing, signaling to criminals that they won’t be subject to longer sentences if, for example, they use firearms while committing crimes. Pierson argues that his LA colleague isn’t progressive but, rather, “reckless.” There is now “no deterrent,” he says, “for people who are going to commit a strong-arm robbery. There’s no deterrent for them arming themselves. In the three months since Gascón has been in office, shootings are dramatically up in Los Angeles.”

That shootings have increased in recent months is true, says Cristine Soto DeBerry, founder and executive director of the Prosecutors Alliance; but as she quickly notes, correlation doesn’t necessarily equal causation. In the 2000s, crime rates fell sharply at
“We have all come to the conclusion that mass incarceration has increased systemic racism.”

—George Gascón, DA of Los Angeles County

As a young journalist in the 1990s, I frequently traveled to California to explore the enormous impact of tough-on-crime laws like three strikes, passed with bipartisan support in the legislature and cemented into the state’s constitution by a successful ballot initiative. During these years, the state, under three different governors—Republican Pete Wilson, Democrat Gray Davis, and Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger—went on a multibillion-dollar prison-building spree, saw a quintupling of its incarcerated population, and witnessed the seemingly unstoppable rise to power of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association. Nothing related to criminal justice stood a chance of passing the statehouse in Sacramento without the imprimatur of the association and its allies in the California Highway Patrol, the police, and the CDA.

By the end of the century, prosecutors were no longer considering whether sentences were just, or even worth the cost to the state of housing the inmates. (It costs upwards of $80,000 a year to house a single inmate in California, according to the state’s legislative analyst’s office.) Instead, success was measured by how long even low-level offenders stayed behind bars. My first book, Hard Time Blues, chronicled the life of Billy Ochoa, a heroin addict, burglar, and petty fraudster from LA who was given 13 consecutive three-strikes sentences—more than 300 years behind bars—for a series of welfare frauds that added up to a few thousand dollars, money that he used to fund his addiction. Ochoa died in a supermax prison a few years later; his incarceration had cost the state several hundred thousand dollars.

Now, after decades of community organizing and, in more recent years, a concerted legislative and electoral reform effort, the criminal justice landscape on the West Coast, from the Mexican to the Canadian border, is undergoing, at a breakneck pace, a once-in-a-generation transformation. “There’s been remarkable progress made, and we have seen a sea change in terms of who’s jumping in to run for prosecutors’ roles, who’s getting elected, what the public wants,” says Lenore Anderson, founder and president of the Alliance for Safety and Justice, one of the leading crimi-
nal justice reform organizations in the country. “But it’s happening in the context of a lot of pushback. This is very contested space.”

Anderson worries that these progressive elected DAs are facing organized opposition from many career prosecutors and the bureaucracies that staff the various parts of the criminal justice and court systems. “It’s not as if the tough-on-crime mindset has gone away,” she continues. “It’s very much alive and well, especially at the local level. It’s going to be a bumpy ride, a roller coaster.”

As Gascón notes, prosecutors have sometimes threatened to resign in masse rather than implement progressive changes—though, to date, these threats have proved empty. He adds that he is routinely accused of being insensitive to crime victims, and that some California courts have pushed back against DAs who decline to prosecute three-strikes cases, with judges ruling that the statute doesn’t permit them such discretion. And at the legislative and ballot-initiative levels, conservatives have, in recent years, attempted to roll back sentencing reforms that converted lesser felony charges into misdemeanors, and they’ve succeeded in reversing moves to end cash bail in the state.

For the progressive prosecutors, this backlash proves that they have succeeded in changing the ground rules and that the tough-on-crime lobby is getting worried. “My election was a parting of the waters, and it impacts the rest of the country because of the size of LA County,” Gascón says. He argues that the DA’s office measured progress by incarceration levels and the number of death penalty convictions for so long that it turned a blind eye to police abuse and became too cozy with police unions to stand up to systemic racism and other violence. He says he’s determined to transform his office, to make the prosecutors of LA County address crime “from a very different point of view—not necessarily a carceral, punitive approach.” But he knows it won’t be easy. When he stopped prosecuting large numbers of three-strikes cases, the deputy DAs’ union sued him. Many of his older prosecutors, who cut their teeth during the early days of three-strikes, made their discontent clear to him.

Contra Costa County DA Diana Becton rides the roller coaster every day. Becton, who quotes Thurgood Marshall and Rosa Parks in conversation, has urged her team to focus on diverting low-level offenders—especially those whose crimes involve drugs—into treatment programs rather than prison. She measures her success by her ability to “shrink our footprint,” reduce the size of the state’s bloated penal infrastructure, and tackle the racial inequities that the criminal justice system has contributed to. And she believes in the need to minimize the influence of the policy lobby in shaping criminal justice legislation and decision-making at the state level. Not surprisingly, she has faced opposition from her own prosecutors. “We have to come in and literally and really change a prosecutorial culture,” she says. “Part of it is education, putting in place new measures of success. Doing what is fair and what is just. What we have at this time is really an exposure of inequities of the criminal justice system on a national scale.”

Up north in Seattle, Pete Holmes wholeheartedly agrees. “We can choose to be enablers,” he says, “continue to be a rubber stamp for police and a lock-’em-up approach. Or we can refuse to participate anymore and break the addiction of ‘call a cop’ for any social problem.”

Around the country—with Kim Foxx in Chicago; Larry Krasner in Philadelphia; José Garza in Austin, Tex.; and Marian Ryan in Middlesex County, Mass.—a new criminal justice consciousness is emerging in the halls of power. Its impact hasn’t been fully felt yet, but these DAs will have an outsize influence in reshaping, and likely downsizing, the country’s bloated carceral systems. In reimagining the language of crime and punishment, they are initiating a broader discussion of power relationships and societal priorities in 21st-century America.

Chesa Boudin believes that, in years to come, prosecutors’ offices should establish Innocence Commissions to investigate allegations of wrongful prosecutions and should push for increased resources for victims’ services, veterans’ services, drug treatment and drug courts, diversion programs for parents and other providers so their children aren’t left out in the cold following an incarceration, as well as neighborhood courts and an array of other interventions that traditional prosecutors have tended to dismiss as naive or utopian.

“It means thinking outside the box in every case,” Boudin says. “Coming up with solutions that are more creative than just locking people up for a certain number of days or months or years. To be successful in building a more just, safer society, we need to do it in a way that brings skeptics and critics along.”
People Counsel for the Tahanie Aboushi is running to transform the nation’s most powerful district attorney’s office from the inside out.
By Moustafa Bayoumi

To hear Tahanie Aboushi tell it, a courtroom can be a strange place for a Muslim woman lawyer.

“I’ve had judges call me Tahnini. I once had a judge, in open court, look at my name and say, ‘Farsi? Egypt? Pakistan?’ I said, ‘Tahanie Aboushi?’” She laughed, shaking her head.

It was late March, and I was in Lower Manhattan with Aboushi and a few of her colleagues. We had just been among the thousands at a rally in Columbus Park protesting the disturbing rise in anti-Asian violence across the country. Afterwards, we walked to Canal Street and sat, Covid-style, outside a Chinatown eatery. The sidewalk thrummed with energy. As what felt like the world walked by our table, Aboushi, in her characteristic deadpan, continued describing her experiences as a lawyer.

“In the first couple of years of my practice, when I would sit down in the front row, a court officer would come by and say, ‘Excuse me, ma’am. This row is reserved for attorneys.’” She paused to punctuate the moment. “I would say, ‘Good thing that I’m an attorney.’”

We all laughed, shaking our heads.

If the unconscious aim of these comments had been to make her feel like she didn’t belong in jurisprudence, then it doesn’t seem to have worked. Shortly after graduating from law school over a decade ago, Aboushi opened her own practice focused on civil rights litigation, and over the years she has scored some key victories. She has sued the New York City Department of Education on multiple occasions for failing to protect vulnerable children, winning significant settlements for her clients. Through litigation, she has challenged and changed discriminatory practices in the city’s police and fire departments.

Now the 35-year-old Palestinian American has stepped onto the crowded dance floor that is the Manhattan district attorney’s race and is racking up endorsement after endorsement and winning all kinds of support across the city and the nation. If she prevails, she will assume the post of one of the most powerful district attorneys in the land, becoming the first woman and person of color to hold that office. She’s also running one of the most progressive campaigns in the race, promising to reduce incarceration and fundamentally change the direction of the office.

If Aboushi wins, people will undoubtedly say that she has made history. But it may be more accurate to say history has made Aboushi.

“She’s the most left-leaning,” said former gubernatorial candidate and actress Cynthia Nixon, who endorsed Aboushi early in the race. Nixon said she was particularly impressed by Aboushi’s platform, which she described as the most detailed of the candidates. “People understand how her lived experience makes her the candidate who will transform the legal system, and the people who really care about that understand that she’s their candidate.”

Aboushi’s campaign would have seemed impossible just a few years ago, when the city’s Muslims were battling NYPD policies that put them under blanket suspicion and subjected them to warrantless surveillance. Now Aboushi—like Rana Abdelhamid, who is challenging US Representative Carolyn Maloney in the 2022 Democratic primary—is one of a rising number of Muslims running for public office, mostly on progressive platforms of institutional reform and resource redistribution. If this six-foot-tall, hijab-wearing Muslim woman who has never held public office wins, people will undoubtedly state that Tahanie Aboushi has made history. But it may be more accurate to say that history has made Tahanie Aboushi.

Born to immigrant parents and raised in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, Aboushi is the sixth of 10 children. On the face of it, her family’s story reads like a classic immigrant success tale. From humble beginnings—her parents owned a small grocery store—the children have gone on to impressive careers. Aymen, an older brother and a partner in the Aboushi Law Firm, was recently appointed as the corporation counsel of Paterson, N.J. Aboushi’s oldest sibling, Diane, is also a partner in her firm, focusing on business law. And one of her younger brothers, Oday, is a professional football player, an offensive guard for the Los Angeles Chargers.

But these accomplishments didn’t come easily. In 1999, when Aboushi was 14 years old, her father, Ahmad, was sentenced to 22 years in federal prison for conspiracy to rob truck drivers and to transport and sell stolen vehicles and goods across state lines, according to court documents. (The multiple charges stemmed from the buying and selling of untaxed cigarettes, Aboushi told me. “It was a pretty thick indictment.”) He was released three years ago.

Eman, Aboushi’s mother, was also arrested (she was later acquitted of all charges). It was during her parents’ trial that the young Tahanie first stepped into a courtroom. It was also the first time she witnessed how degrading criminal justice can be. “I don’t think there’s humanity in the system as it currently is,” Aboushi said. “Decisions are made without weighing what those decisions mean to the family that is appearing before you. What happens to one person in the system extends to their family, to their community. Does the system care? I don’t think it does.”

As evidence, Aboushi cites a moment in her parents’ trial when the judge interrupted the proceedings to ask the prosecutor a question. “What are you going to do with all these kids?” she recalls the judge asking. “He wanted [the prosecutor] to think about what was really happening.”

Moustafa Bayoumi is a professor of English at Brooklyn College and a journalist whose books include How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America.
Making the case: Tahanie Aboushi campaigns in East Harlem in advance of the June 22 primary.  

She also recalls the prosecutor’s response: “It’s not my problem.”  
“She didn’t care,” Aboushi said. “She was focused on that convicting-at-all-costs mentality, even if it meant an entire family and 10 kids wound up in the gutter.”

But through their own efforts, the family survived. They moved to Staten Island, where the cost of living was cheaper. Every family member who could go to work did. Family vacations became oriented around prison visits. And since their father was often moved to different facilities, that could mean traveling to Brooklyn, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, or Connecticut.

There were times the family would make an eight-hour drive to a prison only to be told they couldn’t go in because they were wearing the wrong color that day. (Prisons sometimes have policies on what colors visitors can wear, and these can vary from facility to facility.) In a rush, they would search for the nearest store to purchase something else to wear, chipping away at the precious time allotted for the visit. “The whole process is so dehumanizing,” Aboushi said.

She finished high school in three years and college in another three and was admitted to Syracuse University Law School at age 20. After passing the bar, Aboushi worked for Judge Milton Tingling (currently the county clerk of Manhattan as well as the first African American county clerk in New York state) before eventually opening her practice in Times Square, to be joined later by the other lawyers in her family.

Aboushi’s notable legal victories reflect not only her fight for equal treatment under the law for her clients but also her commitment to restoring lost dignity. In 2018, she won a $180,000 settlement from the city for three Muslim women who were forced to remove their hijabs when their mug shots were taken; two years later, the NYPD changed its policy, allowing religious head coverings in booking photos in most situations. She won a case for four Black firefighters that forced the FDNY to allow members with medical conditions that make shaving painful and potentially scarring to keep their beards. She’s currently representing 21-year-old Dounya Zayer, who was violently shoved to the ground by NYPD officer Vincent D’Andraia last summer during a Black Lives Matter protest.

As significant as these cases and judgments are, the opportunity to effect system-wide change by seeking public office was too tempting. “I can stay trying to do damage control one family at a time as a civil rights lawyer,” Aboushi told me, “or I can be in a position to do something in a deeper, more wholesale way.” While on a trip visiting family in the West Bank in July 2019, and after several people had suggested she run, Aboushi decided she wanted to become the next district attorney of New York County, the official name for the borough of Manhattan.

The current race for Manhattan DA is unlike any the borough has ever seen. The incumbent, Cyrus Vance Jr., who ran unopposed in 2017, isn’t seeking a fourth term, so the field is wide open. Eight candidates—five with backgrounds in prosecution—are vying for the seat, and all are running as Democrats.

In a Democratic city like New York, this means the race will be all but decided on June 22, the day of the primary—and since primaries generate low turnout, it will probably be determined by a relatively small number of voters. Also, because county district attorney is a state office, the race will not use New York City’s new ranked-choice voting system.

The Manhattan DA’s office is considered one of the most important—if not the most important—in the country, which is not surprising considering the concentration of wealth and power on the island. Vance’s office is leading the ongoing investigation into former president Donald Trump’s possible financial crimes, a push that included a high-profile detour to the Supreme Court and that will most likely fall on the next DA to complete. Yet during his tenure, Vance has also been criticized for being weak on prosecuting crimes committed by the elite. A high-profile sexual assault case against the French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn fell apart in 2011. The following year, Vance dropped a fraud investigation against Ivanka Trump and Donald Trump Jr. under questionable circumstances. In 2015, he refused to prosecute Harvey Weinstein for sexual assault. (His office eventually prosecuted Weinstein in 2018, resulting in a 23-year sentence.)

As important as these investigations and prosecutions are, they do not represent the bulk of the office’s work. The Manhattan DA’s office prosecutes tens of thousands of felonies and misdemeanors every year, the vast majority of them low-level infractions that are not committed by the wealthy and white. Unsurprisingly, the people who get caught up in this legal maw are mostly poor and people of color. And Vance’s office has often been considerably more punitive than the DAs in other boroughs of the city, something that most of the lawyers vying for his seat have vowed to change.

Consider petit larceny, a class-A misdemeanor or defined as the “petty theft” of goods or services under $1,000. In New York City, most of these cases are small crimes of desperation, according to experts, often involving stealing a sandwich or shoplifting hygiene products. New York County Defender Services (NYCDS), which serves Manhattan, told The City that well over a quarter of the people it represented in 2018 in cases where petit larceny was the top charge—308 of 1,092 people—were homeless. More than three quarters of its petit larceny
defendants were Black or Latino, and about a quarter received jail time.

These numbers reflect a racially skewed system of punishment, but a person has even more to worry about when they're charged in Manhattan. If, for instance, someone is accused of shoplifting and has a prior trespass notice from the same store, the Manhattan DA often "bumps up" the petit larceny charge to burglary in the third degree, a class-D felony. In 2018, NYCDS represented 47 such individuals. One case involved a man, Qulon McCain, who was homeless and stole four pairs of socks from Bloomingdale's in November 2017, only to find himself facing four years in jail because of the elevated charge.

In the end, McCain, who suffers from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, spent nine months on Rikers Island before pleading guilty and being transferred to Manhattan's Mental Health Court, where those accused of nonviolent felonies may appear if they've been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. In January 2021, he completed a court-mandated 19-month stay at Harbor House, a Bronx-based residential treatment center, according to the Daily News. It was the first time he'd ever received treatment for his chronic mental health issues.

Because McCain successfully completed the program, the felony burglary charge was dismissed and he was sentenced to time served on the petit larceny charge. While this is clearly a better outcome than four years of incarceration, one can't help but believe that a much earlier mental health intervention would have obviated the need to involve the criminal legal system in the first place.

As it was, McCain spent nine months on Rikers Island. In fact, the current Manhattan DA sends more people to jail than any other district attorney in New York City. A 2017 report issued by an independent commission established by the city found that on a typical day in 2016, "38 percent of the City's jail population comes from Manhattan's criminal court," even though Manhattan processed only 29 percent of the criminal caseload that year. "No other borough comes close" to matching Manhattan's numbers, the report stated.

And that trend continues. In the first quarter of 2019, almost a third of the average number of people arraigned in the city came through Manhattan, far ahead of any other borough. Moreover, arraignment is just the beginning for most. Law & Order reruns notwithstanding, less than 1 percent of criminal cases in New York City go to trial; most felony cases are resolved by a plea bargain, which shows how much power prosecutors wield over the lives of the accused. They basically determine the charge, the sentence, and the terms of confinement.

Put these facts together, and the conclusion is inescapable. Vance's office may portray itself as a reform-minded institution—one that has "slash[ed] the number of people entering the criminal justice system in Manhattan nearly in half," according to its website—but it remains a major driver of mass incarceration and is a crucial part of a bloated structure that manages the lives of the tens of thousands of mostly poor Black and brown people arrested annually for misdemeanor offenses.

Indeed, the policies and conduct of the chief prosecutor in Manhattan have probably never been so out of step with the city at least in the modern history of the office. We are, after all, living through a period of reckoning with American racism that is stronger than anything we've seen in recent years.

The next Manhattan DA will be serving a population whose notions of public safety are evolving away from our brutal present of overpolicing and mass incarceration and toward a more humane future. A July 2020 poll found that 55 percent of city respondents favored defunding the police to spend more on local services. And the candidates for DA are paying attention: All eight are running on some version of reform, and not one is running on a tough-on-crime platform.

New York's race is unfolding amid a surge in victories by progressive lawyers who have decided to make the unlikely move to political office, including Kim Foxx in Chicago, Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, George Gascón in Los Angeles, Chesa Boudin in San Francisco, Kimberly Gardner in St. Louis City, Wesley Bell in St. Louis County, and Marilyn Mosby in Baltimore. Why should Manhattan not come next?

In the November 2020 elections, "reform-minded new prosecutors were elected in jurisdictions that represent over 20 percent of our nation's population," Miriam Krinsky, the founder of Fair and Just Prosecution, noted earlier this year. The movement, which has gained most of its momentum since 2016, is growing quickly. And while some of these prosecutors may not have fully lived up to their progressive promises, and while there is still some leeway regarding what defines a "progressive" in these circumstances, the platforms that these prosecutors (continued on page 30)
As the debate over in-person schooling roiled, teachers won significant protections—often with parents' support.
At 7 am on Monday, February 8, Kaitlin McCann, a seventh- and eighth-grade history teacher at the General George A. McCall School in Philadelphia, arrived at work. The temperature was in the teens and snow covered the ground, but McCann didn’t go inside the building where she’s taught for a decade. Instead, decked out in snow pants, boots, and gloves with hand warmers nestled inside, she set up a portable power generator and a circle of socially distant tables and chairs in the schoolyard.

Then she and 30 of her colleagues—about two-thirds of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers members in her building—spent shifts teaching in frigid temperatures all day from their computers outside the school, tangled power cords plugged into the generator, Wi-Fi more or less holding steady. McCann stayed until 3 pm, teaching her full schedule of classes. Her students “thought we were nuts,” she said. But “they understood that what we were doing is to keep them and their families safe.” The teachers’ message: They weren’t refusing to teach; they were just refusing to do so in buildings they feared were too dangerous.

The district had told teachers to report to their classrooms that Monday to prepare for the return of students on February 22. But the teachers and their union insisted it was still unsafe without agreed-upon Covid-19 protocols for ventilation and without vaccine prioritization for teachers, particularly after news surfaced that some schools were merely installing window fans as “ventilation devices.” So on Friday, February 5, the teachers decided to stage a demonstration the following Monday. McCann spent her weekend procuring supplies and organizing her colleagues.

Not everything went smoothly. It was so cold that computers started malfunctioning. Teachers took breaks to warm up in their cars. But they were bolstered by the community. Parents came by to deliver coffee and pizza, chairs and space heaters, and to wave signs of support. Only one parent showed up to counterprotest in favor of reopening.

That night, back in her warm home, McCann saw the announcement on the 5 o’clock news: The city would roll out a new vaccination program aimed directly at teachers, principals, and school staff.

McCann credits the actions of thousands of Philly teachers who taught outside in protest that day for the change in vaccine eligibility rules, as well as more transparency about building conditions. “The action worked—we pulled it off,” she said. Arthur Steinberg, president of the American Federation of Teachers Pennsylvania, noted that the teachers also secured a “robust” testing and tracing program in the schools, which was “directly attributable to our activism and mobilization,” he said.

Whether and how to bring teachers and students back inside school buildings has been the subject of intense debate since last summer. But a clear theme has emerged: Expanding on recent waves of activism, teachers were able to band together and compel school districts to adopt protocols for masks, ventilation, testing, and even vaccination. Teachers have secured “really innovative agreements that were unprecedented,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

In Oakland, the union says it reached a tentative agreement in mid-March that establishes safety criteria more stringent than state laws on things like ventilation and testing, and also requires the appointment of safety leads at schools in areas hard-hit by Covid to ensure that the new rules are implemented. United Teachers Los Angeles had reached an agreement with the LA school district days earlier, in which teachers would return to their classrooms in April, but only after they are vaccinated and the county has complied with the most restrictive tier of health regulations. That agreement represents a “gold standard,” said UTLA president Cecily Myart-Cruz. Chicago teachers had held a “work outside” protest similar to the one in Philadelphia in January and threatened to do so again in April. Those actions resulted in an agreement to send high schoolers back to classrooms that includes a vaccination program for parents and students, which the Chicago Teachers Union said is the “first of its kind in the nation.”

Not all teachers are happy with their unions’ agreements. Some feel that with the Covid case rate still scarily high, it’s not safe to go back before all teachers are vaccinated. When I spoke in early March to Fatim Byrd, who teaches elementary-school Spanish at Mayfair School in Philadelphia, he was reporting to his school building daily even though students hadn’t yet returned and he hadn’t been fully vaccinated. “I don’t mind going in there and being back to work...as long as I have the full protection,” he said. But he worried that he would contract Covid and suffer long-term consequences, given his existing asthma and respiratory issues. “I’m super concerned that as we see
more kids come in, we’re going to see more deaths and more Covid cases.” Some factions within the unions, such as the Working Educators caucus in the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, which he and McCann belong to, have been critical of the union leadership that signed off on agreements to reopen schools. In response to these concerns, Steinberg said that while he understands why teachers are afraid after such a terrifying year, he is “fully confident we have done the best job possible in making sure we have the safest, most responsible reopening plan of any urban district in the country.”

“Teachers should have the right to decide whether they want the vaccine or not,” Weingarten said in response to the same concerns. “We have been very careful in this early stage of pushing back when someone has said that the vaccine should be mandatory.” Instead, the AFT has advocated prioritizing teachers for vaccination.

But if teachers hadn’t flexed their collective muscle, it’s likely they would have been forced back into school buildings without any say at all. In Georgia, where teachers don’t have the right to strike or collectively bargain, no deal was struck with unions, and districts were allowed to reopen without even requiring masks. In the child care and early education sector, which is largely nonunion, providers have mostly remained open throughout the pandemic.

"We don’t trust our building conditions in normal years.”
—Kaitlin McCann, junior high school teacher in Philadelphia

When teachers mobilized around Covid precautions, they weren’t starting from scratch. Several unions were building on a surge in activism in recent years. In 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union staged a seven-day strike to demand better conditions for students, such as smaller class sizes and more teachers, as well as better pay and benefits. The demands resonated deeply with the community. Taking a page from that playbook, teachers in a number of red states held Red for Ed strikes in 2018 to demand more funding for education—a goal they largely achieved. In early 2019, teachers in Los Angeles and Oakland went on strike over similar issues and won higher pay, smaller class sizes, and more support staff. The Chicago Teachers Union followed later that year with an even longer strike. “Whenever [unions] were able to link themselves with the community, especially the community of color, that’s when they really were successful,” said Nelson Lichtenstein, professor emeritus of labor history at the University of California Santa Barbara.

Philadelphia teachers were able to mobilize quickly thanks to their own recent organizing. In 2014, they had successfully organized against state control of the city’s schools. “That really laid the foundation for this,” Steinberg said. More recently, teachers at McCann’s school were asked to take on additional responsibilities; McCann and the union fought the proposals, and the superintendent backed off.

“That moment gained a lot of trust between members,” she said.

The trust paid off on February 8. Even though a few teachers were comfortable returning to in-person teaching, no one walked inside the building that day. “I have never felt more solidarity from my colleagues than in that week,” McCann said.

Byrd and other teachers The Nation spoke with say they desperately want to be back in the classroom with their students. “We know you can’t replace an in-person teacher with just digital learning,” Byrd said. “I’ve always wanted to go back. I just want to go back the right way.” McCann described teaching during the pandemic as “overwhelming.”

There are plenty of days that end in her crying because she’s had such a hard time getting all 120 of her students to turn on their cameras and microphones; even if they do, she doesn’t know if they’re listening. “I’ve never worked harder as an educator,” McCann said.

Many teachers are also parents. The three children of Alejandro Estrada, a fourth-grade teacher at the International Community School in Oakland, are all at home learning remotely while he teaches from the basement; when he comes back upstairs, he often has to help one of them with their schoolwork. “I understand what it is to live with children who are experiencing anxiety, depression,” Estrada said. His son, a high schooler, needed therapy for the depression he experienced last year. “This is hard on everyone.”

But he also teaches in a zip code with one of the highest rates of Covid cases in his county. “We want [reopening] to be done safely for staff, students, and teachers.”

The reluctance of teachers to return to school buildings stems in large part from having worked in substandard conditions for so long. About half of the country’s school districts need to update or replace systems or features in their buildings. In 41 percent of districts, at least half of the school buildings need to upgrade their ventilation or HVAC systems. “We don’t trust our building conditions in normal years,” McCann said. In 2019, 28-year Philadelphia teacher Lea DiRusso threatened to sue the school district, claiming she’d developed a deadly form of cancer from exposure to asbestos in her classrooms. McCann’s building is over 100 years old and only recently went through lead and asbestos remediation. She’s regularly seen leaky ceilings, rodent dropings, bathrooms without soap or paper towels, even broken sinks and toilets. When classroom ventilation was first inspected in the fall, she said, most of her building’s rooms were rated zero—meaning they weren’t safe during the pandemic. Remediation has improved that situation somewhat.

Estrada says that before the pandemic, he didn’t have soap dispensers or paper towels in his classroom; it took the crisis for them to finally
be installed. “It seems like we’ve always been fighting for the same things, and even in Covid conditions we’re still fighting for that,” he said.

Many parents seem to share teachers’ concerns. National polls have found that most parents have been wary of rushing teachers and students back into school buildings. A Politico poll released in February found that a majority of Americans trust local teachers’ unions on whether to reopen schools. Only about a third of the families in McCann’s district opted for any in-person classes. That doesn’t surprise Weingarten: Teachers are “the third-party validators,” she said. “Parents will see a school as safe when they see their kids’ teachers seeing a school as safe.”

The minority of parents who argue for a faster reopening, however, have been very vocal and visible. And some politicians are looking to capitalize on their frustration. Republicans see demonizing teachers’ unions as a way to draw suburban voters and take back Congress in the 2022 midterms. Right-wing groups like the Koch-connected State Policy Network and the Liberty Justice Center, which brought the Janus v. AFSCME union rights case to the Supreme Court, stand ready to support parents suing for schools. Only about a third of Americans trust local teachers’ unions on whether to reopen schools.

The teachers were furious, but Maryland law bars them from striking, so they have implemented a “work to rule” action in which they work only within their contractually mandated hours—the first time teachers in the county have done so since the 1990s. “It takes so much for teachers to speak up in that way,” said Kelley Thomas, a high school teacher in the county. “We absorb so much without question. That lets you know the level of rupture that has occurred.” The teachers also held a caravan to protest in which 700 cars participated, according to the union—the biggest such protest in a decade.

Thomas hopes that the action will continue to have an impact long after the pandemic is over. Working to rule has made her realize “how much work we did outside of the scope of teaching,” she said. The action “has given me a chance to return to my original purpose, which is: I’m an educator.” It has also forged deeper bonds among her colleagues. “We have a shared concern,” she said. “We have a shared passion.”

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The fight over reopening school buildings may appear specific to a historic pandemic, but it has had reverberations that teachers hope will last. The next stage of organizing can’t just be “how to get back to the status quo,” Weingarten said. One key issue is the physical infrastructure in which they teach and their students learn. “It’s a blessing that the pandemic has given visibility to these poor conditions, but I don’t want to go back to that being normal,” McCann said. She had already been part of the Philly Healthy Schools Initiative to demand more funding to upgrade buildings. “We have to keep it at the forefront,” she said. While the American Rescue Plan includes $170 billion for schools, that money is intended to help them implement Covid safety measures and address learning loss, not to fix long-standing problems with school facilities.

In August, the Philadelphia teachers will head into contract negotiations, and while she hopes it can be avoided, McCann said a strike is “very possible” to secure priorities such as a significant wage increases, class size reductions, and more staff like counselors and librarians, as well as concrete language about building maintenance. “By engaging in this work action in February, it’s really a test,” McCann added. “It’s a test to show our community, to show the district, that we’re going to show up and we’re not going to be silent. There’s a lot at stake. I’m hoping our union retains this power, this momentum, going into the fall.”

The pandemic has also mobilized teachers without a recent history of activism. The board of education in Howard County, Md., was in the midst of discussing what metrics to follow for reopening school buildings when Governor Larry Hogan ordered the state’s schools to reopen by March 1. The board reversed course and adopted that date without plans for testing or for establishing cohorts of students in order to enable social distancing and reduce exposure.

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Smash the State

How profiteers and zealots hijacked the CDC's Covid response.

By Nina Burleigh

Not a dream team: Donald Trump, flanked by his advisers, at a March 6, 2020, address in which he claimed that Covid tests were abundant.
The Trump regime declined to use the rapid Covid test recommended by the WHO. He liked the numbers low.

When the National Communicable Disease Center (it would be renamed in 1970) first opened its doors on July 1, 1946, occupying one floor of a small building in Atlanta, the United States was coming out of a world war and the Depression, and there was general agreement that government could be a force for good. The CDC’s primary mission was to prevent the spread of malaria—still a worry in the swamps and electricity-less backwoods of America as far north as New Jersey. Four hundred employees worked with a budget of $10 million to purchase trucks, sprayers, shovels, and labor to eradicate disease-carrying mosquitoes.

By the late 1950s, the CDC was becoming the global model of excellence for public health. Its teams were monitoring disease outbreaks and promoting vaccination campaigns around the world. Its elite Epidemic Intelligence Service of globe-trotting disease fighters eventually played a role in eradicating smallpox worldwide, containing Ebola, and performing countless lesser-known missions.

Before the pandemic, America’s CDC was the agency other nations looked to for advice and assistance. The Chinese so revered it that they

Adapted from Chapter 1 of Virus, now available from Seven Stories Press.

This story involves mass death, religious zealots, and the worst case of government malpractice to facilitate what was deemed a business opportunity in the history of the United States, so I’ll choose the biblical opening:

In the beginning, there was the State.
And the ideologues said, “Let It Be Smashed.”
And so it was smashed.

AMERICANS ARE JUST STARTING TO DIE. INFECTED CRUISE SHIPS ARE stranded at sea around the world. No one in Trump’s administration has decided what to do—or if they have to do anything.

Nobody in this great edifice of American public health that is the CDC—the gold standard for the whole world, journalists will write and write again—is yet wearing a mask.

The president of the United States of America is the emcee, clad in the casual costume he wears for events slightly more important than golfing but less serious than his official duties—including hustling foreign leaders and rousing the rabble at rallies. He’s zipped his White House bomber jacket (retails for $122 at the White House Gift Shop at the time of this writing, presidential seal above the left breast) over his gut. White dress shirt. Red MAGA hat, brim cocked level just above the raccoon white circles around his eyes.

A man named Dr. Steve Monroe, colorless and quivering, stands by. He is the guy who has drawn the short straw of explaining to the media just what the hell is going on with the strange, slow rollout of the CDC’s Covid tests.

No one knows yet how bad it’s going to get. But it is impossible to look at footage of the scene now without an uncanny shiver. The room behind the men is lab-white, festooned with black wires dangling above desktop computers. Georgia Senator Kelly Loeffler—fresh off allegations that she did some insider trading off the pandemic briefing she received before the market crashed—and Governor Brian Kemp are there too, notching a photo op with the big guy.

There’s been a bit of a problem with the tests, Dr. Monroe avers, without addressing the elephant in the room, the major discrepancies between Donald Trump saying “anyone that wants a test can get a test” and his Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary, Alex Azar, claiming “four million tests [would be] available by the end of next week,” and what the CDC’s star virus hunter, Anne Schuchat, has just told Congress: that the CDC has conducted only 3,000 tests.

Trump interrupts Monroe right away: “So tell them about how you’ve done with the tests [inaudible] over four million.”

Dr. Monroe, Azar, CDC director Dr. Robert Redfield, and Trump know what no one in the media arrayed before them understands: There will be no mass Covid testing for Americans anytime soon—if ever.

The slow-walked tests were no accident. The Chinese shared a new disease’s genome with the world on January 11, and within days the World Health Organization recommended a rapid test for it and offered it to the world. American infectious disease experts were already alarmed in mid-January, but the Trump regime declined to use it.

He liked the numbers low.
The moneyed and the Godly were behind decades of brainwashing and propaganda about poor brown people getting free stuff.

Nina Burleigh is a journalist who has covered stories in most of the contiguous states, Italy, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as the author of seven books.

Pressing flesh: Lax guidelines allowed beachgoers to throng Florida in the early days of the pandemic.

launched their own CDC intending to meet the standard it set. At home, though, the CDC was not so popular.

First, for the hard right, what was “public health,” anyway, but socialism? Second, the CDC was a government agency staffed by elite scientists who infected it with their liberalivism and nosed into people’s private decisions. Like how to keep sexually active teen girls from getting pregnant and what to feed kids.

Third, the agency also collected data that put it at cross-purposes with industry. Some of that data collection provoked outright political battles. Congress had had to step in and stop the CDC’s federal gun-violence studies, for example. Tobacco didn’t cause lung cancer, despite what the scientists at the CDC might think they knew. Since the 1970s, the agency had been a thorn in the side of industry, along with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, tracking the health effects of environmental degradation from industrial chemicals. The CDC studied cancer clusters in Louisville related to vinyl chloride, and lead poisoning connected to an ore smelter in El Paso.

The CDC was everything evangelical Christian fanatics wanted to root out. The agency took a common-sense approach to reproductive health and sex education. Its work in the world of sexually transmitted diseases—as well as, eventually, its alliance with Planned Parenthood—sometimes brought it onto the battlefield of the culture wars. The HHS’s policy on the subjects of abortion and contraceptives changed every time the White House changed parties.

Then came AIDS, which initially struck gay men, putting male-to-male anal sex in the scientific and media spotlight. Dr. Redfield and Dr. Deborah Birx are both evangelical Christians whose entries into public health coincided with the AIDS epidemic. Both have been aligned with homophobic organizations. Both were in the Trump administration precisely because those bona fides were more payback to his white evangelical base.

The great and strange financier behind Trump during the 2016 election, hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer, studied for his PhD at the same institution as one of the last American proponents of eugenics in academia, Raymond Cattell. In Mercer’s ideal world, untaxed wealth would be allowed to grow, with corporations and whole industries operating beyond the intrusions of health and safety inspectors, anti-pollution zealots, tree huggers, and lovers of protected snails.

Corporatist libertarians and white evangelical Christians got Trump elected with bold aims: nothing less than the remaking of America into a quantum-age Wild West in which money talks and bullshit walks, women stay home or tee-ter around on fuck-me shoes, useless animals go extinct, God provides coal and oil for humans to extract, and everyone (supposedly) pulls themselves up by their own bootstraps. In this ideal world, the poor, brown, sick, and weak die off, while the white, wealthy, and healthy survive, ensuring the inherent supremacy of the American gene pool.

The regime would pay back the God squad first by letting them colonize the health and human services agencies, where they could dispense with science and focus on rolling back rights for gay people and women. With the Godly thus occupied, and the agencies’ eyes on constraining sex lives and rolling back the ACA, the regime worked cohesively toward the main goal: demolishing the state.

Even before Trump announced he liked the numbers low, members of the pandemic-preparedness community—scientists, medics, policy planners outside the government who studied and made policy recommendations for just such emergencies—were growing more alarmed.

No one could quite believe the federal government of the United States was standing down in the hour of the nation’s greatest need.

One of those in shock was health-systems expert Dr. Bruce Y. Lee, a CUNY professor and analyst. “In March, people in the community were clamoring, ‘Do something,’” he said. “They were clamoring all over the place, on social media. Public health experts were saying, publicly, ‘Do this. This is what you should do.’ And the response from the White House and from the administration was actually not to do anything.”

The pillar of Trump’s political power, contrary to popular belief, was not the “deplorable” rabble that—inexplicably in the eyes of coastal elites and progressives—voted against their own interests on things like national health care and taxing the superrich.

Trump’s true backers were crony capitalists and stone-cold Koch-bro anti-government ideologues. They were flanked by Rapture-ready religious zealots. Between them, the moneyed and the Godly were behind decades of brainwashing radio and social-media propaganda about brown people getting free stuff and feminists and gay people stealing a generation of children from the Christian patriarchy.

The hard-right long game had always been about preventing poor people, and more precisely poor brown people, from taking free stuff. The philosophy crept close to eugenics: When the poor and frail are aided by government and survive, they weaken the American herd.

At the White House, there were bigger things to worry about than a virus. It was an election year, and the rampaging bullish stock market was the issue on which Trump was betting his entire reelection. And it was about to go bear. This was the panic he
had wanted to avoid when he confessed to Bob Woodward that he didn’t want a panic. The crash began on Monday, March 9. The Dow fell 2,013.76 points that day to 23,851.02—at the time, its worst single-day point drop in US market history. There would be worse days ahead, as the market continued to plummet. These were bad numbers to the investors, but for millions of working families, it meant job loss, actual hardship.

Within weeks, images of miles-long food lines in California started showing up on TV. Congress scrambled and fought over how much of a safety net the American people might need to get through it, and the president signed the first bailout—the CARES Act. A measly $1,200 stimulus check was mailed. People who qualified for unemployment could go online and try to cover their monthly expenses.

The day after the stock market first rolled off the cliff and started its pandemic downturn, Trump strode into the White House briefing room. This was a true emergency. Not the virus, chumps. The money!

He had put Vice President Mike Pence—who was standing by in wax figure mode, nodding obsequiously at the man evangelicals had been comparing to Cyrus, the Old Testament Persian king whom God had chosen to save the Jews—in charge of the White House Coronavirus Task Force.

It was an interesting choice.

Antipathy to science had been Pence’s political signature throughout his career in Indiana’s congressional delegation and then as governor of the Hoosier State. His career was based on pushing his sect’s moral code on the public through public health agencies and laws.

Before being whisked back to Washington on the Trump magic carpet in 2016, Pence’s parting shot at the reproductive rights of Indiana women was to sign a law requiring funerals for all fetuses, so that a woman who miscarried—even without knowing she was pregnant—might be breaking the law if she didn’t formally cremate or bury the tissue.

Handing off the management of a serious pandemic to a religious zealot instead of a scientist made sense in the Trump administration because his white evangelical supporters were the key to his political survival, and they cared more about controlling people’s sex lives than just about anything else.

Before the pandemic, one plausible reason for why the Trump regime had not kept its eye firmly on disease outbreaks was that it had been focusing its public health efforts on abolishing abortion, restricting access to contraception, and cutting ties with Planned Parenthood. One of the biggest advances Trump touted at the HHS before the pandemic was the launch of a Conscience and Religious Freedom Division for health workers who felt their “religious liberty” was threatened by aspects of their jobs.

HHS Secretary Azar was a “cabinet sponsor” of evangelical pastor Ralph Drollinger’s Capitol Ministries’ weekly Bible study group, held inside the White House for senior staff. (Drollinger had endeared himself to Trump early by advising him to run America as a “benevolent dictatorship.”) Dr. Redfield—appointed to replace Trump’s first choice for the CDC, a doctor whose investments in tobacco and other sketchy financial deals cost her the job—was a lifelong evangelical Christian who had cut his professional teeth fighting AIDS alongside other evangelicals who were moved as much by homophobic zeal as by Christian mercy. He was famous for having ordered, while in the military, that HIV-positive service members be cordoned off, an arrangement likened to putting the sick in a leper colony.

Dr. Redfield came across on TV and at congressional hearings as a laconic grandpa, but behind the scenes he accommodated the administration’s need to tamp down the sense of crisis, when good leadership would have demanded that he prepare the public for the severity of what he knew was coming.
All they needed was a word from the White House. In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein wrote that a strategy of late-stage capitalism is to use—or, if not available, to create and then use—chaos to give the free market a reboot. The chaos playbook is simple, but it requires certain preconditions. Besides a disaster, it needs blind or nonexistent oversight. The Trump regime provided this in the form of no-bid contracts to a small group of large health care suppliers, let them determine distribution, and brought on MBA mini-me “volunteers” to supposedly coordinate this effort.

The federal government had decided that state public officials should compete in the equivalent of a feudal-themed video game, using the tools they had at hand—battle axes, mead, a bag of magic tricks, and a horse—and fighting each other for ventilators, N95 face masks, and other scarce equipment. That tradition synced up nicely with the goals of the Heritage and Cato foundations, whose minions were quietly leafing through their government-shrinking fantasy-football playbooks. The pandemic offered an unprecedented opportunity to go live after decades of tabletop exercises.

As hospital workers pleaded for help, the White House maintained its focus on its conviction that private enterprise was the way out of this disaster. The administration called for volunteers to staff what would become another public/private bonanza, the White House Covid-19 Supply Chain Task Force, helmed by Trump’s Mr. Fix-It-All, Jared Kushner.

Kushner had an MBA and hung out with Silicon Valley disruptors, and he was credited with the cheap Facebook ad campaign that helped get his father-in-law elected in 2016. A group of dewy-eyed, inexperienced young people answered his call, fresh grads with nothing in their experience that could have prepared them to understand what they were about to be asked to do—much like Kushner himself. Like so much else in the administration’s response, they were off the books—left to use their own laptops and personal e-mail accounts or, better yet, encrypted communication apps like WhatsApp. Eventually, they would be forced to sign the sine qua non of service in Trumpworld, the nondisclosure agreement (NDA).

Twenty-six-year-old Max Kennedy Jr., a grandson of Robert F. Kennedy, was one of the volunteers. He joined the task force when the pandemic put his law school plans on hold, and eventually broke his NDA, writing to Congress and talking to journalists and the filmmaker Alex Gibney. He described a surreal supply acquisition and distribution operation handed off to young people without any logistics experience, operating without direction from or interaction with grown-ups from FEMA or anywhere in the government.

Meanwhile, as summer rolled on, hacks at the HHS were seething with paranoia. They accused CDC scientists of cooking data and science to try to kill Trump’s reelection chances.

As hospital workers pleaded for help, the White House maintained its conviction that private enterprise was the way out of this disaster. (continued from page 21)

They have embraced—along with many of the Manhattan DA candidates—do share some important features. At the core is the goal of enhancing public safety while reducing the harm that the criminal legal system inflicts on so many people, especially since the scope of law enforcement has grown so vast after decades of broken-windows policing and tough-on-crime prosecutions. The strategies commonly used by progressive DAs include declining to prosecute a host of nonviolent crimes, expanding treatment programs instead of prison sentences, developing alternatives to incarceration, launching restorative justice initiatives, refusing to prosecute cases brought by cops with a history of dishonesty, abolishing the death penalty and life sentences without parole (so-called death by incarceration), and ending cash bail.

In Manhattan, the differences among the candidates can appear so slight that their online forums begin to feel like you’re watching burgundy and maroon argue over the color red. But there are some key differences. As of January’s filing figures, former federal prosecutor Tali Farhadian Weinstein has raised the most money, and enough large contributions have come from wealthy Wall Street donors (some of whom also donated to Trump-affiliated politicians like Josh Hawley) that some are questioning her future prosecutorial independence. Former assistant DA and current defense lawyer Liz Crotty, considered by many the least reform-minded of the pack, says she won’t decline to prosecute specific offenses, leaving it instead to the legislature to change the laws.

Aboushi, on the other hand, has the longest and most specific
list of offenses—over 40—that she will decline to prosecute because, she says, they essentially criminalize poverty, mental illness, or substance use disorders. (Studies show that the non-prosecution of many misdemeanor offenses yields substantial public safety benefits.) Her position is getting noticed. Aboushi has made “some bold promises to reduce the scope of the office and dramatically reduce the number of people who would end up incarcerated,” Alex Vitale, professor of sociology and the coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College (where I also teach), wrote me in an e-mail.

Aboushi says her experience as a civil rights attorney gave her an understanding of the collateral effects the legal system has on the families of those who are prosecuted, a reality she also knows personally. (As does another candidate, former deputy attorney general Alvin Bragg, who often speaks of his formerly incarcerated brother-in-law.) “I’m somebody who has been on the other end of a decision a prosecutor has made,” Aboushi told me. “And I think that’s the perspective that has always been missing from these conversations.”

But what is perhaps the most substantial promise made by anyone in the campaign thus far may also be the most difficult to fulfill, considering the number of career prosecutors working today. Only Aboushi and Eliza Orlists, a public defender, have committed to reducing the size of the DA’s office—which employs about 900 attorneys and has an annual budget of $124 million—by 50 percent and putting about 500 attorneys and prosecutors at every social inequity, let’s say that an increasingly assertive Muslim American community

The fact that the Muslim candidate for Manhattan DA is also one of the most progressive in the race is hardly surprising, but it’s worth considering. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, and over these two decades—during which Muslim Americans have endured all sorts of Islamophobia, including the Supreme Court ruling in favor of Trump’s Muslim ban—Muslim Americans, especially women, have been getting more involved in electoral politics and are among the vanguard of progressives across the country. The examples of Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Linda Sarsour may come immediately to mind, but there are many more.

In the 2020 election cycle, a record 170 Muslim Americans were on the ballot, with 62 winning their races. It seems fair to say that an increasingly assertive Muslim American community and increasingly effective progressive movements have culminated, at least right now, in the candidacy of Tahanie Aboushi.

Almost 20 years ago, on September 12, 2001, Aboushi (who wore a hijab back then, too) was heading to Tottenville High in Staten Island. On her walk up the path to the school, she was stopped by a security guard. “You can’t be in school today,” she remembers the guard saying. “It’s not safe.”

She went home, unsure of whether the security guard was protecting her or profiling her. She still doesn’t know, but two decades later, what we do know is that Aboushi isn’t turning around and going home anymore. If a door is closed, she’s going to open it. And she’s walking in.
CERTAIN CITIES IN THE UNITED STATES have developed a claim to fame for representing some vital aspect of America. New York City has often been hailed as its financial and cultural capital. Chicago, the “big shoulders” of the nation, has been depicted as its boisterous center of industry. Berkeley, Calif., and Cambridge, Mass., serve as symbols of American liberalism, and Atlanta as the political and economic capital of Black America.

According to historian and native son Walter Johnson, St. Louis can serve as a symbol of US imperial expansion and racial formation, a “crucible of American history...[at] the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness.” Throughout its existence, Johnson argues, St. Louis has been a microcosm of America’s long-standing compulsion to subvert its own high ideals for the sake of white supremacy and imperialism. But as Johnson shows, the story of St. Louis is not just one of catastrophe; it is also one of constant resistance to the worst in
American history, led by men and women spurred to dream of a better nation. It has been a site for movements of radical hope and resistance to class injustice. St. Louis is where workers established a commune in 1877 that rivaled the one in Paris, and where organized Black working-class men and women inspired people like the historian C.L.R. James and the journalist Claudia Jones to draw lessons from them.

In his new book, The Broken Heart of America, Johnson sets out to convey this twin narrative—of empire-building and racism and of the people seeking to end those evils and remake the country into a genuine democracy—through St. Louis’s incredible history. The city has been at the forefront of American conquest and at the center of American race relations, serving as both a military base and an industrial powerhouse. At the same time, it has often been an arena for those seeking to resist America’s usual predilections for empire and racism. American communism, Black nationalism, the civil rights movement, and Black Lives Matter all found in St. Louis a critical fulcrum on which American history turned, morphed, and redefined itself. The Gateway to the West, as Johnson shows, is also a gateway to understanding America’s violent, unpredictable, and yet sometimes hopeful past.

The Broken Heart of America begins with the ancient Indigenous city of Cahokia and then turns to the Lewis and Clark expedition, which set out from St. Louis, then a frontier town and military installation, to map the territory gained from the French Empire through the Louisiana Purchase. While the expedition was dedicated to exploring what would become the American West, it also helped chart the rise of the burgeoning city. William Clark was an cartographer and leader of the so-called Corps of Discovery, and his actions during and after the expedition generated “knowledge in the service of empire”—a story that Johnson uses to great effect. After Clark returned from the West, he was appointed superintendent of Indian affairs for the Louisiana Territory, an office based in St. Louis that he held for the rest of his life, with an intervening stint as the first governor of the Missouri territory. Clark soon found himself caught between two worlds, maintaining a diplomatic and trade-based relationship with Indigenous groups while also answering to increasingly land-hungry white settlers. He struggled to balance these competing interests, which reflected two conflicting Missouris: one that belonged to Native Americans and one that was being conquered by a white settler population.

Clark’s balancing act didn’t last long and eventually led to his defeat in the state’s first election for the governorship in 1820. Clark was opposed by white settlers who insisted that he had not been forceful enough against the tribes in the area, including the Osage and Mandan peoples. Not that the tribes would have viewed their relationship with Clark favorably, either: Remaining as superintendent of Indian Affairs until his death in 1838, Clark would add “some 419 million acres to the domain of the United States and remove over 81,000 Indians from their homelands,” Johnson writes. Before the United States had military bases dotting the globe, before American political and military might forced the creation of the Panama Canal and the seizure of various lands in the Caribbean and the Pacific, Clark’s St. Louis would serve as the logistical and material hub of a growing US empire in North America. It was a legacy, Johnson notes, that would continue into the 20th and 21st centuries, as the city became a center of commerce in the Western Hemisphere and a place where the lessons of empire would be implemented at home by local police trying to suppress dissent.

The rise and fall of the slave power in the United States, like the rise of the American empire, was also reflected in the history of St. Louis and Missouri. The state’s request for entry to the union in 1818 precipitated the Missouri Crisis. Members of Congress repeatedly spoke of disunion when describing the potential ill effects of Missouri’s entrance as a slave state. Without a compromise—which was eventually achieved by introducing Maine as a free state—civil war appeared to loom on the horizon.

But Missouri was not only an emblem of the slave power’s increasing hold on the American republic. In the years after achieving statehood, Missouri—and St. Louis in particular—became the site of a growing resistance within the South to slavery and the slave power’s national and international influence. Dred Scott, an enslaved man living in Missouri, sued his master Irene Emerson. Scott and Scott’s wife, Harriet Robinson, had lived for six years in the Illinois and Wisconsin territories while still under the ownership of Emerson and her late husband. Because slavery was illegal in those territories, Scott argued that the time he and Robinson had spent there had made them free. The case was immortalized in 1857, when the Supreme Court ruled against Scott.

Yet the struggle against the slave power continued as St. Louis became home to a large population of German immigrants fleeing their homeland after the failed revolutions of 1848. Their impact on the Civil War and post-Civil War history of St. Louis, and on the country in general, also marked a powerful moment of radicalism in the Atlantic world, as the dreams of European egalitarians merged with those of radicals in the United States.

As a result, Johnson suggests, St. Louis could have followed one of two political paths. The first was blazed by Thomas Hart Benton, the Missouri senator whom Johnson describes as the “prophet” of an imperial United States stretching to the Pacific Ocean and beyond. While serving in the Senate, Benton sponsored several Western expeditions and repeatedly pushed for the construction of military bases throughout the West, to dominate trade with various Indigenous groups, and for a transcontinental railroad. The other was the path supported by Missouri’s radical European immigrants and free Blacks and represented by people like Joseph Weydemeyer, one of the greatest left-wing figures and socialist activists in American history.

Joseph Weydemeyer should be at the top of any list of people in American history whose untimely death provoked the question “What if?” Described by Karl Marx as “one of our best people” in the United States, Weydemeyer arrived in the country in 1851 and pushed activists against the power of slavery and recognized the rise of the Free Soil Party in the United States. His influence was felt in the labor movement, and his work continued to inspire people until his death in 1857.
and intellectuals to forcefully address the problem of slavery. When war finally came in 1861, he and many other German immigrants offered their services to the Union. For Weydemeyer and some of his radical allies, the slave power had to be broken before communism could come to the United States. Weydemeyer ended up serving as a colonel in charge of the defense of St. Louis. Yet his most important contributions were not military in nature, but rather the central role he and his comrades played in the political battles of Civil War—era St. Louis.

Not all of the city's German residents saw the end of slavery and the victory of the Union as a way to open the nation to more radical dreams. Carl Schurz, who came to the United States in 1852, supported the end of slavery, but after the Union's victory in 1865, he backed the liberal wing of the Republican Party, which was much less devoted to establishing Black civil and political rights than to enshrining the ideal of free labor across the land—often at the expense of those doing this labor. As Johnson documents, the divisions among Missouri's Germans over the course of Reconstruction—embodied by the competing visions of Weydemeyer and Schurz—mirrored the divides within the Republican Party and the United States itself. Schurz, like many other Republicans early in the Reconstruction era in 1866 and '67, supported political measures that helped enfranchise and empower the newly freed African Americans. But by 1872, he was one of those liberal Republicans who turned away from the racial progress of Reconstruction and saw the plight of Black Americans as something to be solved by the white South.

Weydemeyer, meanwhile, continued as a left-wing beacon. Who knows what would have become of his vision had he not died of cholera in 1866, at age 48. But even after his death, his radical vision lived on—notably in a set of class and labor struggles taking place in St. Louis in the late 1870s. In 1877, the city would be so fundamentally altered by a general strike that, briefly, Americans from New York to California spoke of "the St. Louis commune.”

The labor strife underscored the need for solidarity among white and Black workers, as American capital consolidated and liberal Republicans began to retreat from the egalitarian promise of Reconstruction during the Gilded Age.

A key strength of Johnson’s work is his reminder that even as the Great Compromise of 1877 brought Reconstruction to a formal end in the South, class conflict threatened to tear the nation apart again—and as was the case in the Civil War era, St. Louis was at the forefront of this bitter struggle.

The St. Louis general strike of 1877 actually began with strikes in Martinsburg, W.Va., by railway workers angered by, among other things, their terrible working conditions. The strikes soon spread along the rail lines to major cities across the nation. It was in St. Louis, however, that they reached their radical apogee. To achieve this extraordinary moment of radicalized power, Black and white workers joined forces to fight for their rights as laborers. This was revolutionary in itself, considering that many German Americans had already thrown in the towel on the struggle for Black voting rights during the recent Reconstruction period. This historic moment in St. Louis came after years of organizing by German American radicals, abolitionists, and African Americans in the region. Organizations like the Workingmen’s Party led rallies in the city—and yet they too found themselves not radical enough for the moment. Johnson recounts the election of a committee of laborers to meet with the mayor about the crisis; one of them was a Black man known to history only as Wilson. The Workingmen’s Party, Johnson writes, “was being led by the exigency of the moment and the logic of its own rhetoric toward a revolutionary alliance with the Black workers of St. Louis.”

The national media was both appalled and dismissive of the biracial labor coalition that had formed in St. Louis. Even among some of the strike’s white leaders, Johnson writes, there was surprise at the prominent role their Black comrades played in the movement, creating a rare moment “of interracial working-class solidarity being made plain in the streets.”

Sadly, the eventual collapse of the St. Louis general strike was—like Schurz’s turn to liberal Republicanism and Weydemeyer’s sudden death—a harbinger of the lost opportunities for radicals across the nation. The strike leaders decided to end the outdoor meetings to regain control over the turn of events but found that they had instead “surrendered control of the streets to the police” who then broke up the strike with the Army. Once again, in St. Louis and the country as a whole, a moment for revolutionary change had ended in defeat.

Historians like Heather Cox Richardson, Eric Foner, Richard White, Manisha Sinha, and others have argued for the importance of tying together Reconstruction, westward expansion, and the Gilded Age. After all, they occurred in the same period and were certainly related in the minds the people living at that time. But Johnson reminds us how all three converged in St. Louis—and how they left a lasting imprint on the city.

After the collapse of Reconstruction and the end of the St. Louis commune, the city continued to serve as the central depot for America’s wars against Indigenous people in the West. By the turn of the 20th century, St. Louis’s remained central in American life—geographically, politically, and culturally—even after its periods of radical possibility had passed. At that point, it had already become the capital of ragtime music—"the soundtrack of the emergence of modern African American urban culture,” Johnson writes. Theodore Dreiser used the city to represent the social ills of urban life in a country that was rapidly industrializing and modernizing. And in recognition of its growing cultural significance, St. Louis became the site of the 1904 World’s Fair.

The fair gave the city’s fathers the opportunity to showcase St. Louis to the world. Yet what they showcased was not a city of radical possibility and cultural creativity, but rather one of urban modernity, faced with racism and white supremacy, in all its industrial and technological splendor. Inadvertently, the fair gave the world a view onto modern American capitalism itself. St. Louis’s drive to become a great city—one built on weak government, rampant racism, and deepening class tensions—exemplified the United States at the turn of the 20th century. As Johnson notes, the fair proved to be an ingathering of “professional racists, keepers of human zoos, and Western civilization luminaries.” A decade before World War I, the technological dreams of Western society were difficult to separate from the racist nightmares being dreamed up by America’s elite—and once again, these converging realities were on ample display in St. Louis.

The fear of interracial solidarity and social democracy was a major presence in the minds of much of America’s elite during the Gilded Age and the early Jim Crow years. The World’s Fair reflected this fear. “There was no room at the fair,” Johnson writes, “for a story about African
American racial progress.” The fair’s expositions served as a cultural battleground over the place of racism in American society, with white supremacy almost always winning out. The fairgrounds were filled with segregated restaurants and included a tribute to the enslavement of Black Americans called “the Old Plantation.”

The fair’s racism was a portent of the worsening racial divide in the city and its surrounding area. In 1917, white residents of East St. Louis, a city just across the Illinois border that was becoming an industrial powerhouse in its own right, attacked their Black counterparts in a stunning example of early-20th-century anti-Black violence, one that left anywhere from 39 to over 200 Black Americans dead and drove more than 5,000 from their homes. The events in the summer of 1917 became known as the East St. Louis Massacre. Serving as a prelude to the wave of anti-Black pogroms that would take place in the country in the coming years, the massacre gained international attention—a considerable feat given that World War I was still raging. “This was an attack not just on Black voters or Black workers or Black migrants or Black ‘gun-toters,’” Johnson writes; “it was an attack on Black families, on women and children, on the fabric of Black domestic life, on Black houses and bedsteads and photographs and pianos and phonographs and bric-a-brac, on Black wealth as much as Black labor.” The white citizens of East St. Louis did their best to make the Black community feel unwelcome, and they succeeded beyond their wildest, cruellest dreams.

Yet even amid such oppression, the dream of a multiracial industrial and social democracy lingered in the consciousness of the city’s residents. During the bleak years of the Depression, communists worked side by side with Black activists in St. Louis to fight for economic justice—anticipating, as Johnson notes, the broader national context in which the radicals of the ‘30s and ‘40s laid the foundations for the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1950s. It is no coincidence that Black radicals like C.L.R. James, Claudia Jones, and William H. Patterson went to St. Louis to see this energized freedom movement in person—“not because they thought working-class Black people in the Midwest needed their guidance,” Johnson writes, “but because they wanted to find out what working-class Black people in the Midwest were doing and learn from them.”

Once again, however, the dream of interracial solidarity proved vulnerable to reactionary attack, as the anti-communist backlash forced the movement to go underground in many ways. But another complicating factor was the inability of radicals—Black and white—to truly connect with the city’s Black residents. As Johnson notes, though the communists had some success in organizing Black workers, they struggled to transform these bonds into a movement for radical change.

The failure to create lasting institutions was a problem not just in St. Louis, though a victory there could have made a crucial difference in the fight for industrial democracy and civil rights during the 1930s and ‘40s. Homegrown Black communists like Hershel Walker were well aware of this failure. “We should have left them where they were,” he said—meaning that he and his fellow organizers should have focused on the day-to-day experiences and needs of Black workers in St. Louis instead of trying to transform them into communists.

The St. Louis we know today provides a sobering conclusion to the story Johnson tells. The city continues to be riven by racial and class injustice, and Johnson traces these divisions, in part, to all those missed opportunities. With the collapse of the left in the city, the right was emboldened to make its presence felt and to reshape St. Louis in its image. Far-right activist Gerald L.K. Smith published his long-running Christian nationalist magazine, *The Cross and the Flag*, there from 1942 to 1977. Phyllis Schlafly and Pat Buchanan, two stalwarts of the modern right who often served as a bridge between the far-right beliefs of Smith and his ilk and the more respectable conservatism of the Republican Party, both had their political start in St. Louis.

The use of military equipment and tactics by the police, not to mention their ever-present antagonism toward Black Americans, also have roots in St. Louis, where the police have long viewed Black residents as the enemy. Starting in the late 1950s, St. Louis cops often referred to the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects, with their predominantly Black residents, as “Korea,” and many of these officers were veterans of that “forgotten war.” The corroded relationship between the police and residents still prevails today. In a 2015 report, the Justice Department under President Obama found “a pattern or practice of unlawful conduct” by the cops in the Greater St. Louis city of Ferguson, including extensive violations of “the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution.” St. Louis began its life as a military installation intended to push Indigenous people from the American West. Today it serves as a continual reminder of the attempts to deprive Black Americans of any and every shred of equal citizenship, often by force.

But as Johnson stresses, the rise of conservative politics in St. Louis was accompanied by a revitalized radicalism. Out of the death of Michael Brown and the organized resistance to the long history of police brutality in Ferguson emerged one of the pillars of the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement brought to the fore a truth that most Americans have refused to deal with in the first two decades of the 21st century: that Black and Indigenous people in the United States, generations after the heyday of the civil rights and Black Power eras, still lag behind everyone else in the country in terms of almost every health and social marker. That the movement has also pushed the American left to think critically about the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation has been a boon to grassroots activists, who have struggled to make this very point for years.

St. Louis, though it is no longer a city on the rise, remains a mirror of American political life—both its possibilities and its grim realities. A seat of imperial expansion in the 19th century, the city is also rich in radical history, a place where Ferguson activist Cori Bush could win a seat in Congress. St. Louis, as Johnson reminds us, not only represents the worst of American racism; it also remains a beacon illuminating the possibility of a different America. As we begin to grapple with a new age in American politics—one with Joe Biden, not Donald Trump, in the White House—we might look to the example of radical St. Louis for lessons on how to rise above our country’s reactionary and racist heritage.
An Absolute Shit

The lives and afterlives of Richard Wagner

BY MINA TAVAKOLI

RICHARD WAGNER WAS AN ANTI-SEMITE. THIS WASN’T just ugly, of-the-times bigotry or part of a sad and private hang-up, but a blood-and-body-consuming dimension of his being. As per the usual pageantry that comes with hate, his loathing took on enduring and complicated expressions, was pathetically pseudo-scientific, a product of some combination of transference, projection, and fear, and is, in hindsight—but also was, during his lifetime—a character trait that left his name and work rank with the spice of rot.

For the uninitiated, let me be clear: Wagner was a lot of things. He was a fop—a dandy who died in a room tailored in plum satins and whose last words were allegedly “My watch!” His fundamental rewiring of the ideas of harmony and tonality—the musical mathematics for how some notes are meant to go together—has made him the artist so many credit with ushering in modernism in music. He iscontestably the most influential composer that ever lived, was unequivocally a genius, is outpaced only by figures like Jesus Christ and Shakespeare in the number of books written about him in the Library of Congress, and, as W.H. Auden put it, was “an absolute shit.”

Alex Ross—a New Yorker music writer for the past two decades—has spent the better part of his life bedeviled by both the beautiful and the reprehensible qualities of the 19th-century composer. The outcome of his years-long infatuation is <i>Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music</i>. Like his muse’s operas, the work is filigreed, prone to bombast, at times bloated, and, at over 700 pages, formidable. But the remarkable trick about Ross’s undertaking is in how it steers clear of the usual critical constructions that befall bad artists who make good art. Though Wagner’s myriad hatreds are certainly deeply plumbed, judgment is not Ross’s aim in the book.

Just as in his first, equally brick-sized work—the Pulitzer Prize finalist <i>The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century</i>—Ross here makes the case that classical music from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries foregrounds much of how we think and talk about music and its relationship to the people who enjoy it. But Wagner is a figure that especially imprints on and becomes imprinted with history, revealing, in silhouette, what an epoch and its thinkers share. Ross’s new book charts the ideological pandemonium Wagner unleashed in his audiences, and the result is more an intellectual cartography than an assessment of Wagner’s influence through time. But by following Wagner’s reception rather than laying claim to a decisive reading of his work—instead hunting it, inspecting it, tracking how it moves—Ross has given us a book that does something impressive. Ross, in a rare feat of contemporary criticism, divests himself of his autonomy as a critic, hands it to others, and shows how writing about art is always an intervention between the subject and its beholders.

Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany, in 1813. His mother was the daughter of bakers and his stepfather a playwright who would stoke in his stepson a fascination with theater that Wagner would later call an “almost demonic fire.” With a preternatural capacity to pump out complicated, Beethoven-inspired compositions and with an unshakable sense of grandiosity, Wagner began his musical career as something of a bête noire, virtually destined to court adoration and nemesis.

From his precocious boyhood, Wagner would go on to wedge his ideas for
the art of opera into the minds and hearts of not just his own milieu but generations of listeners and viewers thereafter. He would do so with an iconoclasm otherwise afforded only to inventors of things like Mickey Mouse or the iPhone. So much of how we think about, consume, and stage modern music is indebted to Wagner’s vast acreage of intellectual property—from the way we seat people steeply in theaters to some core principles and practices of conducting; from the sheer concept of atonality to the act of dimming the lights before a show.

Wagner’s music is embedded not only in the global consciousness but in the recesses of the global unconscious, too. The hymn known in weddings immemorial as “Here Comes the Bride” might be the most universally identifiable—taken from a passage in his Romantic opera Lobengrin—but the thunderous “Ride of the Valkyries” (from the second opera in the four-part, 15-hour-long Ring cycle) is inescapable, be it in Elmer Fudd cartoons or Apocalypse Now. There are also the tension-soaked opening notes of Tristan und Isolde, followed by the “Tristan chord”—likely the most analyzed chord in Western music—a sequence that, with its strangely unresolved, half-diminished double dissonance, still sounds remarkably horny, like an orgasm edged, then held to fermata.

Wagner’s influence is so prolific that he’s been immortalized with his own adjective, “Wagnerian,” which, not unlike “Lynchian” or “Kafkaesque,” is a term that swallows a host of meanings almost to the point of unmeaning. The ideas carried in other chronically abused terms, such as “leitmotif” (a recurring bit of music associated with a character or object) and Gesamtkunstwerk (a “total work of art”), also belong to Wagner, and are now associated with works ranging from The Lord of the Rings to the buildings of Le Corbusier. Loudly, publicly, and with the frequency of an obsessive, he also published a number of brainless essays that calcified what he called his “instinctive repugnance against the Jew’s essence.”

The Wagner universe of art and thought was, and is, rich with things that are mammoth-sized, ideas so spacious and Idea the curiously generative hypocrisies of him have tilted public perception, endless relitigations of his character, how that Wagner’s aftershocks as it is the care issue in figuring out the limits of criticism. While the book repeatedly asks, “What does it mean to admire Richard Wagner?,” it implicitly poses a more onerous set of questions: What does it mean to stake a claim to any artist? What are we supposed to do with their damning qualities? What do we do when we equivocate about them—and what gets lost in the process?

Wagner’s life and work constitute an excellent and fertile jungle to wander through in service of the everlasting riddle of whether an artist’s personal prejudices are a significant factor or an extraneous one in the art they create. Negotiating the balance of politics and aesthetics in art criticism is by no means a new endeavor, but Wagner's corpus poses considerable challenges, especially in a contemporary mode, wherein critics often feel like arbiters of ethical consumption. Tacit declarations of a subject’s moral value (or lack thereof) are a hallmark of buzzy reviews—even a recent interview with Ross, certainly calibrated both for search engine optimization and to flatter contemporary tastes, bears the title “Wagner Was the OriginalCanceledArtist.”

But that headline belies the size of the tangle both with Wagner and within Ross's Wagnerism. Though the expectations associated with the adjudication of an artist's goodness might be top of mind for modern readers who've gotten even a whiff of Wagner's ridiculous hostilities, Ross measuredly warns against the promise of a finite answer for what to do with a problem like Wagner. “I am conscious of my limits,” he writes in the introduction, though he's speaking not only of the boundaries of his “expertise and language” but, more broadly, of his aesthetic, moral, and critical project of presenting Wagner as a case study in understanding what happens—and what matters—to individuals when confronted with good art from artists with festering ethical sores.

With so much landscape to cover, as fairly as possible, in Wagner's work—and its dissonant, clanging reverberations—Ross must take on a number of jobs. Foremost, he has to be a well-equipped guide, leading us through the brambly fields of Wagner's output and pointing out the responses his work and personal prejudices are a significant factor in the ways Wagner moved from man to metaphor. But even as he dons these uniforms, what he is not doing a whole lot of, exactly, is passing judgment on the subject or his art. “You need not love Wagner or his music to register the staggering dimensions of the phenomenon,” Ross writes, though the phenomenon in question is not so much that of Wagner's aftershocks as it is the care with which Ross needs to handle the Wagnerverse. He may fastidiously exhaust the point that Wagner has seduced and more or less wrung dry the emotional and rational faculties of all the minds who have been touched by his work. But it’s Ross’s roaming catalog of the wilderness of the world’s deep and motley approaches to Wagner (be they schools of Jewish Wagnerites or Black Wagnerites) that makes the book such a distinctly Gordian knot of the logical and emotional pathways we pave by loving an artist’s art.

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Wagnerism
Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music
By Alex Ross
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 784 pp. $40
What Wagnerism shows, very clearly, is that while music and its creators constrain how you receive them—at least to some initial degree—they will never take away one’s freedom to respond

In a way,” Ross writes, “this book is a story of failed analogies.” From metaphor to allegory, his main action throughout is erecting parallel constructions between Wagner the man and Wagner the myth, in order to chart the passage from Wagner to Wagnerism.

Each literary, musical, and philosophical figure he calls on to give testimony provides a new translation—or mistranslation—by which to read the man’s legacy. It’s clearly not lost on Ross that this marathon act of kneading every tension in and out of Wagner’s knotty corpus is, in itself, Wagnerian. In 2016, Nicolas Dames wrote that in the best criticism, “we should hear a critic’s performance of the work in question, much like a musician’s performance of a score.” This is to say, effective criticism should be as inventive as it is ekphrastic: As it wraps itself around one artistic object, it makes a second one in the process. Furthermore, it’s obligatory: “The behemoth,” Ross points out, “whispers a different secret in each listener’s ear.”

Take the case of Nietzsche. A contemporary of Wagner’s, the philosopher had a revealing relationship with the composer, moving from faraway interest to adoration, idolatry, mania, and, finally, enmity. While both were orbiting around Switzerland in 1869, they began an intimate, near father-son relationship. Fizzy with the buzz around Wagner’s latest opera, Das Rheingold, Nietzsche looked upon the composer with the reverence of a new cult inductee and treated him as a world-historical artist. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche’s 1872 essay, he explained the need for a chaotic, “Dionysian” style of art, to oppose the staid, rational, “Socratic” bilge then dominating Germany. Wagner was that figure, he believed—a man who breathed the “sublime and the ultra-sublime,” a man whose existence accomplished the Sisyphean, superhuman task of “sum[ming] up modernity.”

But Wagner’s grandiosity grew, and it began to gnaw at the disciple. Two major forces caused Nietzsche grief, the first of which was the development of Wagner’s own opera house and festival in the German hamlet of Bayreuth. Though it was conceived—and later successfully executed—as a mecca for opera, in its early days it was a remarkably garish meeting point of commodity and chauvinism, something more like a Wagner-themed amusement park filled with what Nietzsche saw as a maw of “bored, unmusical” guests and “idle European riff-raff.” (Bayreuth would even prefigure some of the gaudier features of modern branding: Shops outside the opera house were stuffed with beer mugs and “sundry toiletries” stamped with Wagner’s face.) “I no longer recognized anything,” Nietzsche practically moaned. “I scarcely recognized Wagner.”

Nietzsche’s second issue with Wagner—a more fundamental, very Nietzschean one—was what he saw as a series of ethical hypocrisies in Wagner’s weak Christian ethos—in particular, his anti-Semitism. Though Wagner had, in 1850, already published a nauseating pamphlet titled “Jewishness in Music” under a pseudonym (K. Freigedank, or “Freethought”)—an essay in which he describes the Jewish people as a “swarming colony of worms that takes up residence in the body of art”—he re-published the work with his full name and a more damning addendum in 1869 and would continue to churn out essays with rabid indictments of Jewishness as a scourge of art until his death in 1883.

For Nietzsche, these texts proved to be too much. In his 1888 essays The Case of Wagner and Nietzsche Contra Wagner, he portrays Wagner as a decaying, duplicitous, anti-Semitic Christian, a stupefier of unthinking audiences with old German classics, and a man who has resolutely “made music sick.” He admits, painfully, that he had misapplied his faith in Wagner’s seemingly world-historical capacities all along. “Wagner’s art is diseased,” he writes. “Everything he touches he contaminates.” Nietzsche “revenged [himself] on Wagner for [his] deceived expectations” by spending his last year of lucidity publishing screeches against him.

The intensity of Nietzsche’s feeling—that violent ambivalence, that long-wrought, well-anthologized defense of his turn away from the composer, and, crucially, that sense of personal disloyalty to the vision of the man he’d constructed and relied on as a savior—is a refrain throughout Wagnerism. Among fans of Wagner’s music both during his life and after, this sense of personalized perfidy is a mainstay. Auden (who, again, called Wagner a shit) also considered him “perhaps the greatest genius that ever lived.” Thomas Mann seesawed between resentment and veneration; the French poet took a similar stance, as Ross notes, “admiring and despising his old idol in equal measure.” The American composer Leonard Bernstein’s wits’-end admission—“I hate Wagner, but I hate him on my knees”—may as well serve as the epithet for a legion of writers and fans who saw revering his work as a sort of conscious hypocrisy.

Adolf Hitler, tellingingly, had a far less fraught relationship to the composer. For him, Wagner was an angel of Germanic ideals. Naturally, the existence of “Jewishness in Music” didn’t harm his legacy in the Führer’s eyes, and it’s very likely, according to Ross, that several particularly nasty passages in Mein Kampf were copied closely from Wagner’s essay. In Hitler Speaks, the German reactionary Hermann Rauschning even quotes Hitler as seeing something of a spiritual master in him: “I recognize in Wagner my only predecessor…. I regard him as a supreme prophetic figure.” The depth of this ardor rendered the memory of Wagner, Ross tells us, “warped…around Hitler’s presence” in the 20th century: The Wagner estate’s support of the Third Reich, the “flurry of Wagnerianism” in the Nazi regime, and the consecration of the Bayreuth Festival as a site of annual Nazi visitation after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 sealed the connection securely. The critic Siegfried Scheffler, in a review of the first Nazi-packed event, referred to the pair as the “two Führers.”

“One danger inherent in the incessant linking of Wagner to Hitler,” Ross notes, “is that it hands the Führer a belated cultural victory—exclusive possession of the composer he loved.” For Ross,
such a victory is far more ambiguous: Though Wagner had unquestionably been an anti-Semite, he had also been something of a left-wing anarchist and a self-proclaimed man of the people.

Wagner was exiled from Germany and its musical world for 12 years after playing a not-unmeaningful role in the 1849 May Uprising in Dresden by ordering hand grenades, serving on the barricades, and loudly rallying rioters from the town hall balcony. “The backshadowing narrative was too simplistic,” Ross writes; he quotes the German academic Hans Rudolf Vaget, who alleges that the young Hitler’s exaltation of Wagner is one of “patent normality within the cultural context from which he sprang.” Socialists, communists, social democrats, radicals, dilettantes, and anarchists all found sustenance in Wagner, and yet his co-option by Hitler effectively reduced him “to a cultural atrocity—the Muzak of genocide.”

Declarations like “too simplistic” are a hallmark of Ross’s approach to un-snarling the life and afterlives of Wagner’s work, and this critical tool eventually becomes anticipatory. Each passage is so rhythmic in its argument, so swinging in its pendulum, that it begins to move metronomically. First, it lays out the land—a portion of Wagner’s life, a fan, a foe, a movement, a reaction to him—then, without fail, it swings in the other direction. Often, we enter baroque hyperbole, a favorite means by which Ross re-creates just how inchoate, contradictory, and dense Wagner’s system of art and belief was. Baudelaire’s ardor for the music was like that of “an addict, an opium dreamer,” and Twain’s response to the prelude to Parsifal, Ross reports, was “rhapsodic, almost delirious.” Ross himself speaks of the operas as having “near-infinite malleability” that often created “interpretive pandemonium.”

But any man contains multitudes, and in its own way, the volume of commentary that describes Wagner’s spell as ineffable can feel like a critical sidestep. It often seems as if the only way to approach the darker spots that stain Wagner’s being is to blur them into murk.

Ross is aware of this analytical short-cut. Wagner’s “misogyny, like his racism, can dissipate in the face of an unexplained force that erases distinctions and brings about transcendent unity,” he writes. This is to say, delusion or self-deception will necessarily be part of any equation that involves celebrating an artist. And when it comes to Wagner in particular, there is a certain sense of fantasy in believing a single idea.

To paraphrase Mann, it’s more valuable to be intoxicated not by intoxication but by insight. Ross devotes crucial moments of his book to the curious cases of those fans who disdained Wagner’s cruel politics but adored his music. Wagner was embraced not only by Hitler but also by Afro-Wagnerites, feminist Wagnerites, and even the not-entirely-rare examples of Jewish Wagnerites. In these fans, we can witness the logical leaps some took to not exactly defend their adoration of him, but to be able to separate their adoration from conventional identitarian narratives and ground it in their own terms. Each subject takes things personally, but this only sometimes means politically.

To take one peculiar example: Theodor Herzl considered himself a proud Wagner acolyte. As the father of modern political Zionism, he found himself “enraptured by the music of the great anti-Semite,” as his biographer Amos Elon noted, and sought deep inspiration in the eb and flow of Wagner’s music as he wrote what would become The Jewish State. In his 1898 autobiography, he recalled, “My only rest in the evening was listening to Wagner’s music, particularly to Tannhäuser, an opera that I went to hear as often as it was given. Only on the evenings when no opera was performed did I doubt the rightness of my ideas.”

W.E.B. Du Bois shared an equally glowing conviction. Transfixed after his first visit to Bayreuth, he saw in Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung a vision of particularly African American heroism. “It is as though someone of us chose out of the wealth of African folklore a body of poetic material and, with music, scene, and action, re-told for mankind the suffering and triumphs and defeats of a people,” he wrote in his travel column for the Pittsburgh Courier. In The Souls of Black Folk, he seems to get at a greater point: “Something in this world man must trust. Not everything—but Something.”

Riven with apparent contradiction, Du Bois’s admiration does not absolve Wagner of his idiocy, nor does Herzl’s appreciation abate the fact that Wagner would have categorically loathed him and his cause. Neither is it easy to resolve the fact that Emma Goldman found in Wagner’s work a pressure valve for women’s “pent-up, stifled and hidden emotions,” or that, as Ross writes, Wagner became part of the “syllabus of gay taste,” with queer writers like Hanns Fuchs referring to him confidently as a “spiritual homosexual.” Sundry other surprising Wagnerites populate the history of left-wing thought, such as the Black intellectuals, like Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, who found beauty in Wagner’s Teutonic idealism.

These Wagnerites’ relationships to the composer are what make Wagnerism and the idea of approaching art with a true subjectivity so fertile. Nietzsche seems to get to the core of Wagner’s sharpest effect in a journal entry written during his most passionate period of obsession with the composer. “All of the psychologically decisive passages,” he wrote, “speak only of me.”

Across these nearly 700 pages, Ross has done the work of explaining that there is no science in the logic of love, but it is worth an attempt to make one. Claiming messiness does not suddenly resolve a critical argument. By the same token, reason, and conviction in that reason, cannot undo hate. Even with such a monstrous artist and such a monstrous body of work, Ross insists that no love for an artist demands complicity with their evils. Artists are notoriously uncompromising, but what we’re slated (or doomed) to do is try to compromise convincingly with what’s at hand.

In an interview titled “The Value of Frustration,” the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips makes the salient case that the language of pleasure and the language of fulfillment are inextricable. “I think that the equation of happiness with forms of satisfaction is the problem,” he notes. “I think it is that we’re bewitched by the idea of gratification and we’re bewitched by the idea that gratification is what we want and is the thing that will make us happy.”

Satisfaction, or the idea of expressing complicated ideas economically—the swift and flattened thesis, tales of good versus evil—does
not find a home in Wagnerism. We’re reminded again and again of his genius and his sins, but in a pattern that constantly reasserts itself in Ross’s narrative, we follow how each version of Wagner that each fan, critic, or reader holds close or views from afar is shaped by the person’s ability to see him, articulate him, separate him out into pieces, and underscore what matters most.

Tugging along these lines of inquiry is not always satisfying, but it is, very literally, a model of the varying limits of empathy. “What we hate in it,” writes Ross, “we hate in ourselves; what we love in it, we love in ourselves also.”

And this is where we are left at the end of Ross’s book. Wagner will remain ground zero for the method of taking an artist and measuring the person’s worth in terms of value systems that are historical, selective, and utterly emotional. Seeing oneself as a devoted Wagnerite or an anti-Wagnerite cannot be considered mutually exclusive conditions. It shows the way that individual politics work—how they are self-selective, shifting, and sometimes paradoxical. Wagner, like politics, is a perceptual proposition—a thought experiment that asks us not only what we value but also how we meaningfully justify those values as true.

Moral imperfections are tantalizing, whether they’re within Wagner or any contemporary artist. And a public’s fascination with the slippages that contradict the impossible idea of “greatness” is productive—it allows us to realize that the principles of art and ideology are not so much inseparable as they are the same force. Flashes of the most Wagnerian figure in this country today came involuntarily to mind as I read Ross’s book, and no mention of his name is necessary to underscore Ross’s success in outlining the enduring relevance of a towering, self-satisfied, endlessly fascinating figure whose myth often eclipses his reality and whose seductive factors seem baffling to many. It is certainly easy and attention-getting to begin a critical appraisal with an argument for why one’s subject is reprehensible and deserves our revulsion. But Ross also insists that it’s important to consider at length why so many others have been attracted to the same figure or his work. As Wagner himself intimately understood, harmony and resolution are two entirely different forces.

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Junk
Mark Bittman’s history of why we eat bad food
BY BILL MCKIBBEN

Mark Bittman writes the way he cooks: the ingredients are wholesome, the preparation elegantly simple, the results nourishing in the best sense of the word. He never strains; there’s no effort to impress, but you come away full, satisfied, invigorated.

From his magnum opus, How to Cook Everything, and its many cookbook companions, to his recipes for The New York Times, to his essays on food policy, Bittman has developed a breeziness that masks the weight of the politics and economics that surround the making and consuming of food. In Animal, Vegetable, Junk, his latest book, he offers us his most thoroughgoing attack on the corporate forces that govern our food, tracking the evolution of cultivation and consumption from primordial to modern times and developing what is arguably his most radical and forthright argument yet about how to address our contemporary food cultures’ many ills. But it still goes down easy; the broccoli...
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A Time of Youth
San Francisco, 1966–1967
WILLIAM GEDNEY
EDITED BY LISA MCCARTY
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Bittman starts *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* with the early hominins. As these human ancestors learned to walk upright, they began to forage across larger areas and hunt with comparative ease. Bittman notes that they also started to develop more flexible diets: “a variety of fruits, leaves, nuts, and animals, including insects, birds, mollusks, crustaceans, turtles, small animals...rabbits, and fish.” Eventually, with the nutritional boost of this new diet, they soon learned how to track faster prey (which was easier to do in groups and thus produced more social behavior) and to cook over fire.

With more nutrients and more advanced methods of gathering and cooking food, the early hominins’ “already sizeable brains grew bigger.” Hardwired to eat “what we can, when we can,” they had diets that differed from place to place: “Some humans had diets high in fat and protein, and some had diets in which carbohydrates dominated.” But despite these differences, the emerging food cultures and diets had one thing in common. The epoch of hunting and gathering produced “a period of greater longevity and general health than in almost any other time before or since.” Eventually it also produced a new trick: how to stay in one place and grow crops whose surplus could be stored.

That transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture was welcome in many ways, but it came at a price, Bittman writes. Yes, it supported larger populations, but diets became monotonous and less nutritious, life spans declined, and work hours increased. Bittman is not the first to make this argument. Jared Diamond memorably called farming the biggest mistake in human history, and so Bittman doesn’t belabor the point, accepting that we now live on a planet where food is something we raise, not something we hunt or gather.

For Bittman, the central drama of this story begins in the course of the last century, as agriculture and food processing became mass industries, and as we moved from having two types of food (plants and animals) to being overwhelmed by a new third type—one that was “more akin to poison.” These “engineered edible substances, barely recognizable as products of the earth, are commonly called ‘junk.’”

This junk food has created, Bittman argues, a “public health crisis that diminishes the lives of perhaps half of all humans.” Through its dependence on an agriculture that “concentrates on maximizing the yield of the most profitable crops,” it has done “more damage to the earth than strip mining, urbanization, even fossil fuel extraction.”

Any number of data points illustrate this new reality, but let’s choose a couple that show what happened to farming. In the decades since World War II, chicken production has increased by more than 1,400 percent—while the number of farms producing those birds has fallen by 98 percent. This kind of industrialization is obviously unkind to animals and to those who once raised them—the former live in tiny cages, and the latter, depending on where in the world they reside, often move to shantytowns on the edges of capital cities. And the damage to the natural world is every bit as great. In Iowa, for instance, stock living in CAFOs, or concentrated animal feeding operations, produce as much waste as 168 million people, or 53 times the state’s population. This manure is housed in giant lagoons that sometimes flood; it is perhaps not surprising that the people of Des Moines to drink the tap water.

The ability to produce massive quantities of a few commodities—wheat, corn, and corn syrup—has enriched not farmers but a few giant middlemen (companies like Archer-Daniels-Midland and Cargill) and implement dealers (John Deere makes four times as much money providing credit to struggling farmers as it does selling tractors). And it has created a new problem: what to do with the massive amount of calories that this commodity-focused agriculture produces. “The system,” Bittman explains, now “delivers a nearly uninterruptible stream of food, regardless of season,” and in the process it has created junk: the processed food that now dominates the Western diet and, increasingly, many other diets around the world. “Junk made it possible to encourage people to—really, made it difficult for them not to—eat too much non-nourishing food over a prolonged period.”

As Bittman notes, the calories have to go somewhere, and—thanks in no small part to the advertising industry, which attached itself to the food industry like a remora to a shark—they went inside us; we look the way we do because of the need for the Krafts and Heinzes of the world to keep their profit margins growing by finding new ways to get us to consume their limited line of basic commodities. “Global sugar consumption has nearly tripled in the past half-century,” he writes, and so has obesity; the number of people worldwide living with diabetes has quadrupled since 1980. “Two thirds of the world’s population,” Bittman tells us, “lives in countries where more people die from diseases linked to being overweight than ones linked to being underweight.”

It’s not just our bodies that suffer from this commodity agriculture; it does huge damage to communities as well. Bittman discusses how small Black farmers, especially in the South, have been systematically sidelined by federal policy and how a fairly stable system of peasant agriculture in Mexico was destroyed by the North American Free Trade Agreement, which dismantled the economic protections that allowed it to persist and flooded the country with cheap American grain. Since it took 17.8 labor days to produce a ton of corn in Mexico, and 1.2 hours to do it on industrialized farms in the American Midwest, the result was never in doubt. Now the United States supplies Mexico with 42 percent of its food, which should give you some idea of why so many people needed to come north. Adds Bittman: “NAFTA also brought junk food to Mexico. Imports
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interesting initiatives that are taking hold in different parts of the world and beginning to have a larger impact. Countries from Uruguay and France to South Korea and Taiwan have passed laws limiting junk-food advertising to kids, and they seem to work. Quebec, which banned such ads 40 years ago, has fewer overweight children than other parts of North America. In 2012, Chile—where half of 6-year-olds were overweight or obese—passed the world’s strongest food labeling and advertising laws. Any processed food high in calories, sodium, sugar, or saturated fat carries a “stop-sign-shaped ‘black label’” and can’t be advertised to kids under 14 or sold in schools; “almost instantly Chilean children went from seeing 8,500 junk food advertisements a year to seeing next to none.”

Mexico has also fought back as best it can; a tax on soda has driven consumption down 12 percent. Bittman cites more notable successes on the local level. Belo Horizonte, Brazil’s third largest metropolitan area, has bankrolled “People’s Restaurants” that sell high-quality lunches at affordable prices and cooked-from-scratch school meals emphasizing more vegetables and fewer processed foods; the government also subsidized farmers’ markets that sell staples at reduced prices and funded urban gardening programs. As a result, hunger in the city has been “nearly eliminated...while fruit and vegetable consumption and farmer income have risen.”

Even in the United States—the belly of the beast, as it were—Bittman finds some interesting developments. He describes the Good Food Purchasing Program, which began in Los Angeles in 2012 and sets standards for nutrition, animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and treatment of the labor force. When LA schools signed on, their main distributor started reaching out to wheat farms that could meet the new standards, which led to 65 new full-time, living-wage jobs. Cities from Boston to Oakland have signed on to the GFPP, and New York is about to join.

But more dramatic change will only come with initiatives like the Green New Deal, which “with carbon neutrality as a starting goal...would necessarily support...sustainable agriculture.” In fact, by the end of the book, Bittman uses the food crisis much as Naomi Klein did the climate crisis in her landmark This Changes Everything: as a lever for thoroughgoing change. “Instituting fairness in race and gender means in part undoing land theft, racial and gender-based violence, and centuries of wealth accumulation by most European and European American males, wealth accumulation that is still being compounded. This means land reform, this means affordable nutritious food regardless of the ability to pay. This means wholesale change.” Indeed it does. “What’s for dinner?” has always been among the most basic of human questions. Now, asked honestly, it’s among the most unsettling and the most explosive.
Letters

Facing Global Challenges

Thank you for launching a debate in your pages on geoengineering as a tool to avert climate catastrophe (“Should Governments Consider Engineering the Atmosphere?” by Oliver Morton and Amy Westervelt, April 19/26). The fundamental problem becomes evident in the first two words of your title. Although global warming is the greatest global challenge we have ever faced, we have nothing like a global government, or Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s 1835 “Parliament of man,” to confront it. Both Morton and Westervelt recognize that virtually any kind of geoengineering will affect different nations in wildly different ways. In our world of separate, sovereign states, it seems far from unlikely, perhaps even inevitable, that individual nations will pursue geoengineering projects which might benefit that nation today but harm both the rest of the planet today and generations unborn tomorrow. So how about a debate in the pages of The Nation on redesigning international institutions, reinventing the United Nations, and reimagining global governance to discern and pursue global public policies (on climate and much else) that serve common human interests and the global public good?

TAD DALEY, JD, PhD
Director of Policy Analysis, Citizens for Global Solutions
LOS ANGELES

While offering a wealth of caveats urging a cautionary approach to geoengineering, neither Morton nor Westervelt addresses a critical issue in this debate. Although geoengineering efforts in carbon dioxide reduction, such as actual tree planting or artificial tree deployment, could reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide to our benefit, solar radiation management would address only the warming and do absolutely nothing to reduce ocean acidification, as the release of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide also drives ocean acidification when absorbed into our waters. Indeed, by allowing fossil fuel combustion to continue, the solar geoengineering approach would likely enhance ocean acidification at the expense of marine ecosystems and our fisheries.

ALAN JOURNET, PhD
Cofacilitator, Southern Oregon Climate Action Now
JACKSONVILLE, ORE.

A Win for Workers

Re Nelson Lichtenstein’s review of Gabriel Winant’s important new book, The Next Shift, about the caring economy (“The Age of Care,” April 19/26): While Professor Lichtenstein is correct that the health care industry as a whole suffers from a relatively low unionization rate, it should be noted that home care worker organizing, predominantly led by Black women and other women of color, grew by over 600,000 new members in the Service Employees International Union and others from the 1990s to the 2000s, one of the largest and most successful organizing drives of the modern labor movement.

KEITH KELLEHER
CHICAGO

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John Edgar Wideman has outlived many of his peers. Born in Washington, D.C., in 1941, he grew up in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh and went on to attend the University of Pennsylvania. In 1963, he became the second African American to win a Rhodes scholarship, and in 1967, he got his MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where he’d studied under Kurt Vonnegut, among other luminaries. That same year, Harcourt published his first novel, *A Glance Away*, and he was off to the races. Since then, Wideman has published nine more novels, six collections of short stories, and five memoirs, earning nearly every award possible in the process. And he shows no signs of stopping. His commitment to finding new stories to tell, his attentive chronicling of persistence through loss, and his dedication to craft have made him one of the greatest living Black writers of the 20th and 21st centuries. Wideman’s new collection, *You Made Me Love You: Selected Stories, 1981–2018*, compiles short stories about issues as diverse as slavery and abolition, sports, visual art, academic scholarship, and more.

—*Elias Rodriques*

**ER:** You’ve dedicated this collection “To all those coming up after: stay in the struggle.” What’s the struggle?

**JW:** For me, the struggle is continuing to live a life and to cope with the unexpected, the unknown, and the threatening. In other words, the big struggle is to maintain some sort of integrity of inner life that is precious and valuable. That’s all we have. I want to reach people at the level at which they are organizing a sense of self and of individual identity.

**ER:** Looking back at the work in this collection, some of which is 40 years old, what stands out?

**JW:** The fun for me was to go back and read some of these stories, and to have other readers and editors read the stories and say, “I like this one” or “We don’t need this one.” That made me go back and read them. I don’t usually do that. One thing you learn through age: You don’t have forever. You’d better use the time you have. Books that are already done are like games already played. There’s a whole bunch of stuff that might be interesting and fun about games that are over, but they’re over. I’m hungry for the new day to figure out the sentence that I need next to move the story that I’m in the middle of.

**ER:** Prisons are central to so much of what you have written. How have your thoughts about prisons and abolition changed in your fiction?

**JW:** I read everything I can get my hands on about prison reform, the history of prisons, and the philosophical debates about prisons and punishment. I have that intellectual interest, but unfortunately I’ve had family in prison for as long as I can remember. I’ve written about it and thought about it, and I’m still fighting not only prisons per se but also the courts, the law, and the institution of parole. My brother was in prison for fortysomething years, and then he got out. What happens to somebody who’s had that experience? Where are they going to go? Where do they fit in? How do they catch up? How do they learn to use a computer? What the hell is a cell phone when you haven’t seen one or touched one?

**ER:** How do they adjust?

**JW:** The mechanical jumps are nothing compared to the emotional and metaphysical adjustments that a person makes. I have learned so much from my studies of prisons, and I’ve learned from my brother and my son. I’ve watched the kind of strength they’ve maintained despite imprisonment. When I’m looking for heroes, I could start there. How does a person survive when all the normal props are totally taken away? Everything from your shoelaces to where you lay your head at night to what you eat to how long you can stay up to who you are able to consort with to what you can read—all that stuff is controlled by external forces. How, in that kind of abyss, do you maintain a sense of identity?

That’s the struggle I was talking about for the people like my brother and my son. There’s so much to be learned: What has a society lost, what have they gained, and why that price? Why couldn’t something happen to them in the free world that would create strong individuals like that? Why do we have prisons that can squeeze out some of the best in human beings and an educational system that squeezes out some of the worst?
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