

# THE **N**ation.

MARCH 8/15, 2021

EST. 1865

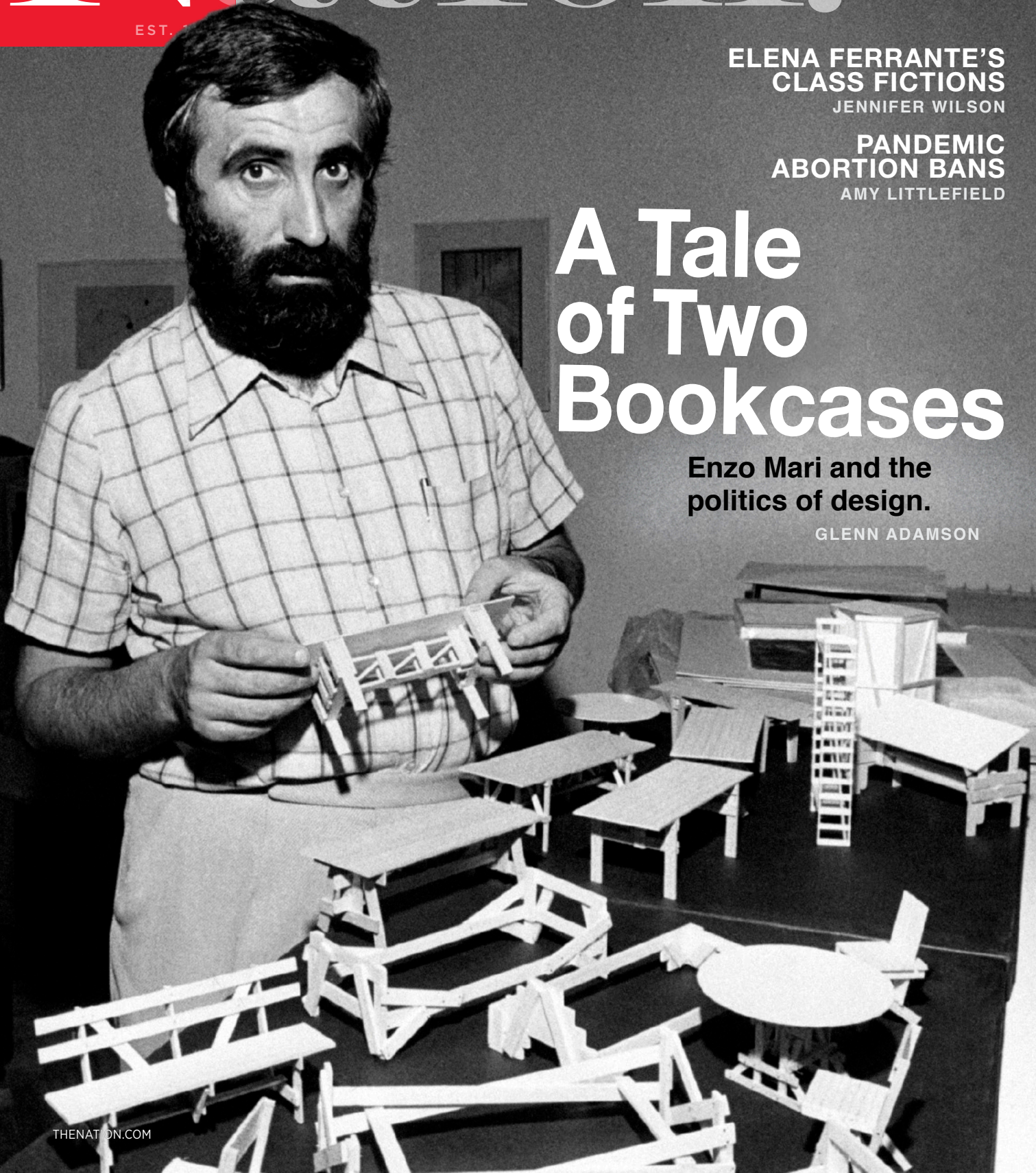
**ELENA FERRANTE'S  
CLASS FICTIONS**  
JENNIFER WILSON

**PANDEMIC  
ABORTION BANS**  
AMY LITTLEFIELD

## A Tale of Two Bookcases

**Enzo Mari and the  
politics of design.**

GLENN ADAMSON



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**Undaunted:** People in Yangon, Myanmar, confront an armored vehicle patrolling the streets after days of mass protests against the military coup on February 1.



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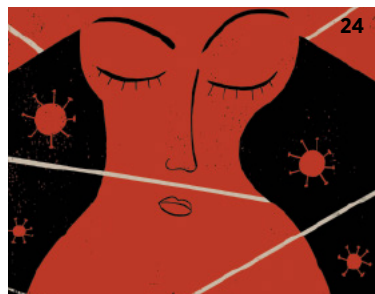
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EDITORIAL / JEET HEER FOR THE NATION

# Impeachment Was Just the Beginning

**P**RACTICE DOESN'T ALWAYS MAKE PERFECT, BUT IT CAN LEAD TO MARGINAL IMPROVEMENT. The second impeachment of Donald Trump yielded slightly better results than the first. In Impeachment 1.0, every Republican in the House of Representatives voted against it, while all but three Democrats voted in favor. The Senate was also divided along partisan lines, with Mitt Romney the only person to break ranks and become the first senator to vote to convict a president from his own party.

Romney's stance was a lonely one; this time he had more company. In Trump's impeachment for incitement of insurrection, 10 House Republicans voted to impeach and seven Republican senators voted to convict. Trump's hold on the GOP is slowly weakening.

Still, both impeachments must be considered disheartening failures if seen in isolation. The only way to redeem their legacy is to make them stepping stones in the essential political project of de-Trumpifying American politics. Trump remains a toxic figure on many grounds: racism, corruption, abuse of office, and incitement to violence. For defenders of American democracy, the still-urgent mission is to turn him into a political pariah: to ostracize him from the political process, radically diminish his political power, and change the incentive structure so that Republicans will think twice before allying themselves with him again.

Unfortunately, Trump's Senate trial shows that one big barrier to de-Trumpification is the fecklessness of some Democrats. While Congressman Jamie Raskin was a particularly effective impeachment manager, he was hampered by party leaders who cared more about a quick trial than about presenting all the evidence or persuading the country. The Democrats' biggest misstep was their uncertainty about calling witnesses. Initially, they were ruled out. But on the night of Friday, February 12, with the release of a startling official statement from Republican Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler, the Senate voted 55-45 in favor of hearing from witnesses.

Alas, the House impeachment managers backed down. Delaware Senator Chris Coons, almost certainly acting as President Biden's emissary, put the screws to his House colleagues. According to *Politico*, Coons told House Democrats, "The jury is ready to vote. People want to get home for Valentine's Day."

With that, Democrats gave up a chance to highlight testimony that would surely have embarrassed Trump and his supporters—and may even have pried loose a few more Republican senators.

As *The New York Times* reported, "For weeks, President Biden and his aides have tried to frame the second impeachment of his predecessor, Donald J. Trump, as a distraction from his efforts to fulfill the promises he made to the American people."

Biden's view of impeachment as a "distraction" is a disheartening sign that he may not have the stomach for the fights to come. Far from being a distraction, de-Trumpification is essential for achieving Biden's agenda. Shirking the confrontation over witnesses revealed internal Democratic weakness and will only embolden the GOP's recalcitrance and extremism.

The next step is to move to legal remedies, through both the criminal and civil courts, as well as continued congressional investigation to establish more facts about the riot. There is some tension between these two goals: Care has to be taken that the gathering of evidence for a congressional investigation doesn't taint any court proceedings.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi recently called for a 9/11-style truth commission. But commissions of this sort often serve to whitewash the truth in the interests of elite comity. A congressional investigation would be more transparent, more inclined to probe deeply, and much more

in keeping with the responsibilities of Congress.

And while congressional investigators must move with care, once court proceedings start to document the former president's criminality, this will again become a political as well as legal matter. The model here should be the robust congressional investigations of the 1970s that arose in the wake of Watergate, such as the Church Committee's probe of US intelligence agencies. These hearings should work to amass a clear record of Trump's crimes—and the failures of the political system that enabled him. That is America's best chance for a full recovery from the damage inflicted by Trump and his followers. **N**

**Care must be taken that a congressional investigation into Trump doesn't taint any court proceedings.**

COMMENT / WILLIAM D. HARTUNG

# Diplomacy First?

*That was Biden's promise in his first major foreign policy speech. But he also must reduce the Pentagon's bloated budget.*

**I**N EARLY FEBRUARY, JOE BIDEN WENT TO THE STATE Department to give the first foreign policy address of his presidency. His key theme was the need to restore America's global leadership by adopting a policy of diplomacy first and repairing the damage to US alliances inflicted by Donald Trump. In support of that pledge, Biden recounted a series of steps he has taken already, from extending the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia to rejoining the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization. He has also promised to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal.

These are all positive moves, but a more effective and progressive foreign policy requires more than just undoing the damage of the Trump years. It means putting the real risks to human security—from the pandemic to climate change to racial and economic injustice—front and center. A good place to start would be reducing the Pentagon's bloated budget, which at nearly three-quarters of a *trillion* dollars per year is at one of the highest levels since World War II and accounts for well over half of the government's discretionary budget. Biden has been silent on this point, but he will need to address it if he wants to make the enduring investments in public health, environmental protection, and fighting poverty and inequality that we urgently need.

Biden's most encouraging specific announcement was his pledge to end "all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales." (By contrast, Barack Obama supplied Saudi Arabia with tens of billions of dollars' worth of arms and provided logistical support for its brutal war in Yemen.) Biden also announced the appointment of a special envoy, Timothy Lenderking, to lead US efforts in pressing for an end to that war. Such efforts are long overdue: Nearly 250,000 people have died in Yemen since the war began, according to a December 2020 United Nations report. Millions of Yemenis are on the brink of famine, and the country is uniquely vulnerable to diseases like cholera and Covid-19 because of the destruction of much of its health care infrastructure and the lack of access to clean water and life-saving medicines.

Biden's policy shift is a victory for human-rights, humanitarian, arms-control, peace, and foreign-policy reform organizations, which have worked closely with groups in Yemen and the Yemeni diaspora, such as Mwatana for Human Rights and the Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation, joined at key moments by congressional leaders like Representative Ro Khanna and Senators Chris Murphy, Mike Lee, and Bernie Sanders. They have worked for years to end US support for the war and to find an inclusive, peaceful resolution to the conflict.

While encouraging, Biden's announcement raised as many ques-

tions as it answered. What constitutes "offensive operations," and which arms sales are "relevant"? At a minimum, the new policy should block *all* major arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and prohibit targeting assistance, intelligence sharing, and the maintenance and support of US-supplied weapons systems. Over 80 progressive groups and individuals, led by Win Without War, the Yemeni Alliance Committee, MADRE, and the Center for International Policy, have called on the administration to permanently cancel dozens of arms deals, worth tens of billions of dollars, with the two Persian Gulf monarchies.

Yemen is only the most egregious case of the use of US-supplied weapons to cause civilian harm. Biden's promise to reverse the negative consequences of US arms and military support should extend beyond Yemen and address the actions of other reckless and authoritarian regimes, such as those in Nigeria, Egypt, Bahrain, and the Philippines.

Biden also pledged in his speech to review the US global military posture. This will offer an opportunity to debate whether Washington really needs 800 overseas military bases, nearly 200,000 troops stationed abroad, scores of global deployments of special forces, and routine drone strikes in areas of conflict. A thorough discussion of the issue—one that involves both the public and Congress—is imperative if we are to give meaning to the goal of "ending endless wars."

Biden also talked tough about confronting the misdeeds of Russia and China, while acknowledging that we must cooperate with them on issues like arms control and climate change. The administration must act on the fact that the greatest threats to human life can only be addressed through cooperation with rival powers, not confrontation, and must therefore avoid a new Cold War or an arms race with China.

Biden's speech was a refreshing change from the erratic, transactional approach of the past four years. But there is much that needs to be fleshed out if Washington is really going to set a new course in which diplomacy indeed comes first and we abandon once and for all the militarized approach to foreign affairs that has characterized US policy for so many years. **N**

**Biden's most encouraging announcement was his pledge to end US support for the Saudi-UAE war in Yemen.**

*William D. Hartung is the director of the Arms and Security Program at the Center for International Policy. This piece was adapted from an article on the center's blog, The Baraza.*

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IN MEMORIAM

## Rennie Davis (1940–2021)

**R**ENNIE DAVIS, WHO DIED ON FEBRUARY 2, WAS ONE OF the New Left's most talented organizers—and one of the sanest and best-liked. He was one of the organizers of the anti-war protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Rennie was charged with and convicted of inciting a riot, but his portrayal in the recent Aaron Sorkin film *The Trial of the Chicago 7* is a travesty. He nevertheless urged people to see it because of its “timely” message about the value of protest and the necessity of speaking truth to power.

In the early 1960s, before the escalation of the Vietnam War, Rennie led Students for a Democratic Society in its efforts to build an interracial movement of the poor, working as a community organizer among poor whites in Chicago. When the war became the decade's dominant issue, he and Tom



**Chicago 3:** Rennie Davis (center), flanked by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin at their trial.

Hayden traveled to Hanoi in 1967 to witness the devastation that American bombers were inflicting on civilians there. They were among the first Americans to make the journey, and on their return, they organized the protest at the Chicago convention.

Though Rennie had hoped for hundreds of thousands of protesters, only 15,000 showed up after Chicago Mayor Richard Daley

made it clear the police would do everything they could to stop the protests. But the police attacks on the marchers made headlines, and what happened was later judged a “police riot” by the commission that investigated it.

Rennie went on to organize a much bigger and more amazing anti-war event, although it's much less known: the May Day protests in Washington, D.C., in 1971. The slogan was “Stop the war or we'll stop the government.” Mass civil disobedience led to the arrest of more than 12,000 people, the largest mass arrest in American history.

As the '60s came to an end, Rennie became a follower, briefly, of an Indian boy guru. The move puzzled and dismayed his friends and prompted widespread ridicule. But he eventually returned to organizing, in the past few years working on creating a network of intentional communities in response to climate change.

Rennie was warm and engaging when we did a *Nation* event in October. He described being taken to an underground shelter as American planes bombed Hanoi. To pass the time, his hosts read news reports about the plans to hold the Democratic convention in Chicago. “They said, ‘Aren't you from Chicago?’” he recalled, laughing. “It was there that I learned about the Democratic National Convention. It was there that I made the decision: I am going to Chicago.”

Jon Wiener

## Objection! Elie Mystal



# The GOP Strikes Back

*After failing to disenfranchise enough Black voters to overturn the 2020 election, Republicans are churning out voter restriction bills.*

**A**T THE BEATING HEART OF THE BIG LIE—THE deranged fantasy that the 2020 election was stolen from its loser, Donald Trump—is the Republican belief that the votes of Black people shouldn't count. In lawsuit after lawsuit after the election, Republicans asked the courts to throw away votes that had been cast in predominantly Black communities.

In Michigan, they literally singled out Detroit and threatened to refuse to certify its votes. The GOP's entire postelection strategy was to reinstitute race-based voter disenfranchisement all the way up to January 6, when 147 Republican lawmakers voted to straight-up overturn the results because Black people had overcome the white supremacy baked into the Electoral College.

While the failed Capitol insurrection has stymied at least some of these efforts, the very serious work of preventing Black people from voting in the future continues apace. The Brennan Center for Justice reports that state legislatures have already prepared three times as many voter restriction bills this year as were proposed during the same period of time last year. The numbers are staggering: "Twenty-eight states have introduced, prefiled, or carried over 106 restrictive bills this year (as compared to 35 such bills in fifteen states on February 3, 2020)."

In Pennsylvania, for instance, the Republican-controlled legislature has proposed 14 new restrictions. New Hampshire's legislature has put forward 10. (They should change their state motto to "Vote Republican or Die.") Senator Josh Hawley's home state of Missouri has nine voter suppression bills kicking around, while 11 are on the docket in Georgia, which seems determined to suppress its way back to being a red state after Democrats won the presidential election and two Senate runoffs there.

The new laws cover everything Republicans could think of to make it harder for people to cast a vote. Many of the proposals are laser-focused on absentee ballots: Republicans want to make those harder to get, easier to reject, and impossible to fix. Other laws make it harder for people to register to vote. Still others want to make it easier to purge registered voters from the rolls.

Republicans don't have to succeed in all of these attempts—and, ultimately, they don't have to suppress that many additional votes—to throw

future elections their way. Despite Joe Biden whupping Trump by over 7 million votes nationwide, his margin of victory in the Electoral College came down to about 43,000 votes across three states. The college is already rigged to produce Republican victories despite the will of popular majorities. If Republicans can make it just a little harder for the multiethnic coalition united against them to *vote* against them, then the Electoral College will do the rest.

The Republican candidate for president has lost the popular vote in seven of the last eight elections. What's wild is that the GOP has no plans to address this problem, no strategy to broaden its appeal beyond the insular white racists and wealthy white business interests that represent a stagnant and aging minority of the country. There will be no reckoning, no autopsy, no self-reflection about what their party has become. For them, it's voter suppression or bust.

The Democrats' response to the Jim Crow-style policies being unashamedly pushed by Republicans appears to be the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. The bill, renamed for the famed Georgia congressman after his death, seeks to restore elements of the 1965 Voting Rights Act eviscerated by Chief Justice John Roberts in 2013 and add additional protections against discriminatory voter ID laws.

The problem, somewhat obviously, is that the Supreme Court could strike down this voting rights act just as easily as it did the original. There's no guarantee that Roberts will view Congress's new law more favorably—and even if he does, the court today is very different from it was in 2013. To withstand a legal challenge, the Lewis Act would have to be upheld by Roberts, the three remaining liberals on the court, and at least one member of the ultraconservative wing: Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Amy Coney Barrett, or alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh. None of these conservatives have ever shown the slightest inclination to protect voting rights, and I'm not particularly hopeful they'll start now.

But the rot goes deeper than that. Conservatives on the lower courts are in on the voter suppression game as well, since they also realize that denying the franchise to Black voters is the

best way to ensure continued white dominance. Historically, white people have always been creative when it comes to disenfranchising Black people—never mind the 15th Amendment's prohibition on race-based voter restrictions—and white

**Historically, white people have always been creative when it comes to dreaming up new ways to disenfranchise Black people.**

courts have always been willing to look the other way. Whether it's forcing Black voters to count jelly beans in a jar or insisting that formerly incarcerated people pay fines before they're allowed to vote again, the forces of white supremacy always find their muse when Black people try to exercise political power.

No legislation can anticipate all of their maneuvers. As currently written, the Lewis Act doesn't have strong protections for mail-in ballots, because such ballots weren't a big issue until a few months ago. This means the act is already outmoded, and while I'm sure it will be rewritten and strengthened, it does go to show that, when

it comes to voter suppression, Republicans practice the kind of racism that never sleeps.

That's why it's critical to have judges who will uphold the principle of voting rights, even in new situations. The problem is that Republicans

have stacked the courts with conservatives who clearly won't. Don't be fooled by the judiciary's resistance to the Big Lie: Asking judges to throw out votes that have already been cast, as the Republicans did, is different from asking them to make it harder for votes to be cast in the first place. As we saw in the last election, conservative judges were perfectly happy to knock down laws that would have made it easier and safer for people to vote during a pandemic.

The most important thing Democrats can do now to secure voting rights is to expand the courts and flood them with judges who will fiercely protect access to the ballot box. We need judges who will counteract whatever the Republicans do next to disenfranchise Black folks.

Voter suppression is an attack on our democracy that is happening right now, in broad daylight, and it's being carried out by the same forces of white supremacy that stormed the Capitol. And like the Capitol insurrectionists, the voter suppressionists must be met and defeated. **N**

## Subject to Debate Katha Pollitt



# The Disloyal Opposition

*No matter how loudly liberals call for unity, Trump voters aren't listening. What now?*

**W**HAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT THE 74 MILLION OF our fellow citizens who voted for Donald Trump? After he won the White House in 2016, Democrats were told we had to understand them. Reporters promptly descended on small-town diners, where old white men were happy to vent their resentment at being looked down on by liberals, professors, and city dwellers. In her much-discussed *Strangers in Their Own Land*, the sociologist Arlie

Russell Hochschild urged liberals to cross the "empathy wall" and feel the Tea Party's pain. "Economic anxiety" was the preferred left explanation—no matter how often one pointed out that Trump voters had a higher median income than Clinton voters or wondered out loud how come Black and Latino people's economic anxieties didn't make them cast ballots for a reactionary reality-TV clown.

The Trumper was always the small farmer, the miner, the worker whose factory had closed. Except for the occasional piece marveling at women and evangelicals who didn't care about Trump's pussy-grabbing, nobody was too interested in interviewing dentists or realtors or supermarket owners—the regular Republicans who were the vast majority of his supporters.

After the shocking invasion of the Capitol on January 6, we know better. Trump's army does include those miners and factory workers—as well as Proud Boys and Three Percenters and lost souls who live in QAnon's paranoid fantasyland—but also plenty of solid citizens. As Robert Pape and Keven Ruby point out in a detailed analysis in *The Atlantic*, "The demographic profile of the suspected Capitol rioters is different from that of past right-wing extremists. The average age of the arrestees we studied is 40. Two-thirds are 35 or older, and 40 percent are business owners or hold white-collar jobs. Unlike the stereotypical extremist, many of the alleged participants in the Capitol riot have a lot to lose. They work as CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists, and accountants. Strikingly, court documents indicate that only 9 percent are unemployed." A lot of them live in solidly blue counties.

This, not the QAnon Shaman, is today's GOP. After all, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert needed the votes of a lot of regular Republicans to be sitting in Congress today. Sixty-one Republicans voted to censure Liz Cheney for voting to impeach Trump; only 11 voted to remove Greene from her committee assignments for her batshit antics, including approval for murdering Nancy Pelosi. We warned one another against normalizing Trumpers by presenting hard-core reactionaries as ordinary people. But what if they are normal—the new normal? A person can have a job and a house and a family and also be a racist, a misogynist, and a believer in weird things, such



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as that Barack Obama is Kenyan, George Soros is behind the Black Lives Matter movement, or Joe Biden stole the election.

What to do? Splitting off from the red states, a perennial liberal fantasy, is too silly even to discuss. And remember when white people were told they were cowards and collaborators if they didn't give their Trumper relatives and friends a superhard time? Obviously, individual efforts at conversion haven't worked on the scale needed: Trump increased his vote total between 2016 and 2020, even adding more Black and Latino men. I'm not going to say you will never persuade Cousin Bob that Hillary Clinton isn't a child killer and that health care is a human right, and you should definitely try, but it is really hard to change someone's mind. Wouldn't it make more sense to concentrate on phone banking, registering voters, donating to grassroots organizers, and getting involved in politics with people who already agree with you?

In a recent *Atlantic* essay, Anne Applebaum suggests that we can give the Capitol invaders and their supporters a path back to society by coming together with them on apolitical projects: volunteering, civic betterment (Christmas decorations?), discussions of common interests. "Ask for ideas. Take notes. Make the problem narrow, specific, even boring, not existential or exciting. 'Who won the 2020 election?' is, for these purposes, a bad topic. 'How do we fix the potholes in our roads?' is, in contrast, superb," she writes. According to Applebaum, such "peacebuilding" efforts have worked in Northern Ireland.

The problem is, the pothole discussion already happens across parties—it's a town council perennial—and yet here we are. Applebaum writes hopefully that cooperation among political antagonists "doesn't mean they will then get to like

**Perhaps I am naive, but I try to remember that there are more of us than there are of them.**

one another, just that they are less likely to kill one another on the following day."

It's a nice thought: Just get people working on a neutral issue of common concern, and before you know it, they'll be grabbing a beer together and admitting, "Hey, you're OK." Definitely better than murder. But except for the horrible killing of police officer Brian Sicknick at the Capitol, the actual political murders in recent years have mostly been premeditated attacks committed by militia types and anti-abortion fanatics and racist loners like Dylann Roof. It's

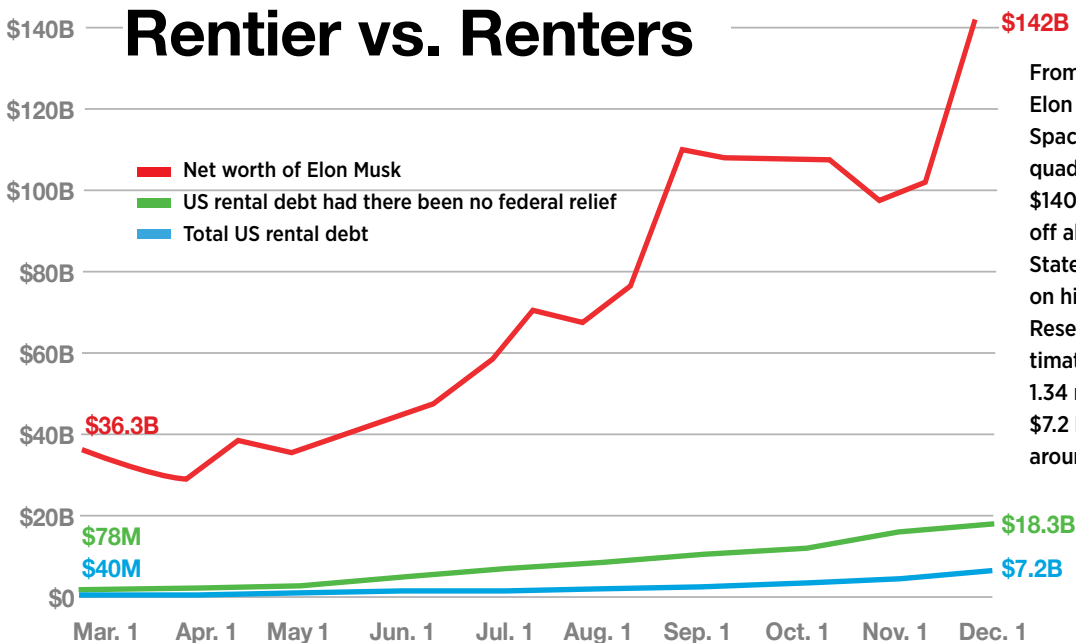
safe to say they weren't too interested in fixing the streets.

I'm not worried that my neighbor, who kept a huge Trump flag flying until the day the election was certified, is going to kill me. My other neighbor says he's a sweet guy, and he probably is. I don't want to harangue him, and I don't want to sit in boring do-good meetings with him. I just want him not to run the country.

Perhaps I am naive, but I try to remember that there are more of us than there are of them. True, thanks to the Constitution, and gerrymandering, and *Citizens United*, and the six conservatives on the Supreme Court, Republicans have powerful advantages. But if we can lessen sheer desperation—and Biden's \$1.9 trillion aid package is a good start—maybe we can peel off the Trumppers who really are motivated by economic insecurity. Maybe, if we can get enough power, the Trumppers' numbers will dwindle as they see it's not so terrible to have health insurance, or to legalize the status of immigrants who've been living here forever, or even to wear a mask to prevent a deadly virus from spreading. Or maybe they won't, and we'll just have to make sure they lose—like they did in Georgia. **N**

PLOT POINTS

# Rentier vs. Renters



From March to December 2020, Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, saw his wealth nearly quadruple. Worth more than \$140 billion, Musk could pay off all rental debt in the United States and barely see an impact on his net worth. The Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia estimated that by December 2020, 1.34 million households owed \$7.2 billion in rent, an average of around \$5,400 each.

# Should Progressives Push a Floor Vote on Medicare for All?

## Yes

CHASE IRON EYES

**T**HE RECENT #FORCETHEVOTE campaign, which urged progressive members of Congress to withhold their support for Nancy Pelosi's reelection as House speaker until she pledged to bring Representative Pramila Jayapal's Medicare for All bill to a floor vote, was more than theoretical. I believe that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, her squadmates, and our historic contingent of lefty representatives should have forced the vote. Not for the Twitter, Twitch, and Instagram thrills or as an act of political theater, but as proof that the working class will not let any elected officials—whether Trumpers or liberal Democrats—deprive us of our human right to health care.

Make no doubt about it: Medicare for All is coming to the United States. No one can block it—not Big Pharma, not the insurance industry, not the hospital lobby, and not the entire corporate ruling class. But while there is no stopping a single-payer system from replacing our broken one, politicians whose campaign coffers are filled by the 1 percent can still slow the movement. Progressives in Congress must recognize the urgency and be relentless in their push for Medicare for All. Anything we can do to speed up the process matters: Each year, nearly 45,000 people die and more than half a million families declare bankruptcy because they lack affordable health care.

Our democracy is stratified. And too often we are forced to accept whichever caste we were born into. Nearly half a million Americans have died from Covid-19, and 30 million of us still do not have health insurance. Ordinary workers cannot afford medical care for their bodies, including their eyes and teeth, which for some reason are treated as organs of luxury. Too many of us have been conditioned to be ashamed of our inability to pay for quality health care and panic at the very thought of needing to see a doctor or dentist.

The labor of the working class is abstracted, commodified, and exploited by a machine that seems too big to fail. What we have is a kind of 21st-century feudalism—shaped by low wages and corresponding debt from student loans, credit cards, and inflated medical bills—that serves only billionaires.

But Americans increasingly realize the growing inequities in our system, and those of us in the media and public policy underestimate how much energy there is to change the

## No

NATALIE SHURE

**I**N THE WANING DAYS OF DONALD Trump's presidency, amid a holiday season all but canceled for many by Covid-19, a heated debate unfolded in the left-of-center Twitterverse. Kicked off by a viral clip of comedian Jimmy Dore, who called on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other progressive representatives to withhold their support for Nancy Pelosi's reelection as House speaker unless she agreed to a floor vote on Pramila Jayapal's Medicare for All bill, the #ForceTheVote campaign fiercely divided advocates for single-payer health care. While both sides agreed that the gambit had no chance of actually leading to the bill's passage—it isn't supported by a majority of Democrats, let alone a majority of Congress—they disagreed on whether it advanced the interests of Medicare for All over the long haul. For proponents, the tactic promised an attention-grabbing spectacle highlighting the urgency of universal health care in the midst of a pandemic and would yield valuable campaign fodder to use against its opponents. But others saw it as little more than a parliamentary stunt that would go unnoticed at best and, at worst, would reinforce the media narrative that frames Medicare for All as an impossible pipe dream.

With Pelosi's reelection in January, the best path forward for Medicare for All remains uncertain. While President Joe Biden staunchly opposes it, the razor-thin Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, as well as Democratic supermajorities in several states, could still present opportunities to advance the cause. Even if #ForceTheVote never materialized as initially conceived, many advocates continue to push for a floor vote as soon as possible. But the unfortunate truth is that the Medicare for All movement lacks the power to make such a vote effective.

More than a year into the coronavirus pandemic, the case for single-payer has never been clearer: Millions of Americans have lost their employer-provided insurance; inadequate access to care has driven up the Covid-19 death count; and hospitals have found themselves underwater without revenue from elective procedures. The pandemic has given us an intimate look at our country's unequal health outcomes, which Medicare for All would do more to address than any other systemic reform. But moral necessity

Debate The Debate

power dynamics of this country. The attempted coup against the US government by radicalized Trump supporters—on top of our fatally negligent response to the pandemic—has fully exposed a nation built on racist fascism and disregard for the poor. Yet this moment of awakening provides fertile ground for all of us who seek a better day—especially those who cannot afford to get sick or take off a single day from work. The politics of the moment are unpredictable and unstable, but they have created an opening for the left.

With the blue team now in control of the House, the Senate, and the White House, we have a fleeting chance to enact humane policies, and Medicare for All is perhaps the most important of all. Had Democratic representatives withheld their support for Pelosi and put real pressure on the corporate party establishment, we could have connected the anger of the suffering and uninsured to the systems that keep them down.

Instead of trying something bold and transforming the rage all around us into political action, Democrats in Congress missed an opportunity to push single-payer health care forward. But we will have more chances to demand that our representatives endorse Medicare for All. Ocasio-Cortez argued that Democrats didn't have the numbers to pass it,

tweeting, "So you issue threats, hold your vote, and lose. Then what?" Well, why not prove our power in the halls of Congress while organizing in the streets? Forcing the vote lets the public see where our politicians stand. It feeds into other organizing and makes clear to elected officials that the people are watching them. It also helps the public

pinpoint which Democrats value donors over working people.

Seventy percent of Americans support Medicare for All. This is evidence that the demand for affordable, accessible health care cuts across party politics and race. Most of this country is working-class and ready to imagine a different, more livable world. Americans are waiting on the Democrats to finally exhibit leadership against the Republicans and others who are willing to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on handouts to big corporations and wealthy households but too stingy to give more than \$600 to minimum-wage workers.

Medicare for All is achievable in the United States. But to get there, we will have to make ambitious demands and be confrontational regardless of who's in power, whether red or blue. Progressive Democrats must not miss their next opportunity to put pressure on the Pelosis and Chuck Schumers of our system. How else will we match the pressure exerted by the pharmaceutical and hospital lobbies, tech monopolies, and military contractors? **N**

*Chase Iron Eyes is the lead local counsel in the Dakotas for the Lakota People's Law Project and a cofounder of the Native news website Last Real Indians.*

IRON EYES

SHURE

## The Debate

isn't enough to win against a \$3.8 trillion health care industry that accounts for nearly 20 percent of the US economy and would be fundamentally upended if Medicare for All were to become a reality. With the health care sector already accounting for some of the top political spenders in Washington, there's virtually no limit to the amount it would expend to topple reforms far more incremental than Medicare for All. Overcoming the ruthless opposition of the health care industry will take a mass movement willing to hit the streets, engage in direct action, and even go on strike to demand single-payer. Until Medicare for All has that kind of movement power behind it, it will easily be defeated by capital—a lesson we've learned repeatedly from health care reform battles in the past. And while it has popular support, polling between 40 and 70 percent, the same was true of national health insurance in the 1940s, until a major doctor-and-insurance-backed lobbying effort made the prospect of "socialized medicine" utterly toxic.

From that perspective, the idea of putting politicians on the record regarding Medicare for All has no obvious value. For one thing, similar insight can already be gleaned from a list of the bill's House and Senate cosponsors. But more important, given the current power disparity between the Medicare for All movement and the colossus it confronts, the unavoidable fact is that most of the elected officials who say they're in favor of single-payer health care will never be true ride-or-die supporters until we can generate enough force to make the idea of bending to our will more compelling than bending to Big Health Care's. That's going to take a lot more than tweets exposing campaign donations to Democrats from pharmaceutical companies. The Democrats could stop taking those tomorrow, and it still wouldn't change the fact that hospitals are often the largest employer in a given district or that public pensions are deeply invested in companies whose value will shrink in the wake of more equitable public financing.

What we're confronting, then, is the very heart of wealth and resource distribution in the United States—and floor-vote proponents do a grave disservice to Medicare for All advocates by pretending that this can be solved with a strategy that centers calling out public officials. #ForceTheVote has the relationship between electoral politics and capital precisely backward: Bad politicians aren't why we have a health care system dominated by moneyed interests; the supremacy of moneyed interests over American health and welfare is why we have bad politicians.

Fight accordingly! Go knock on some doors. **N**

*Natalie Shure is a writer whose work focuses on health, history, and politics.*

**Most of this country is working-class and ready to imagine a different, more livable world.**

**The supremacy of moneyed interests over American health and welfare is why we have bad politicians.**



SNAPSHOT / Ina Fassbender

# One Year Later

At top, a crowd of revelers watches a float depicting the “carnival virus” taunting the coronavirus at last year’s traditional Rose Monday parade in Düsseldorf, Germany. Below, masked helpers push a similar float—this time portraying a triumphant coronavirus mocking the weeping carnival virus—at a slimmed-down version of the same parade on February 15.

## By the Numbers



**1**  
Number of major US cities that slashed their police budget by more than 15 percent for the year 2021 (Austin, Tex.)

**\$150M**

Amount cut by the Austin City Council from the police department’s budget (about one-third)

**\$6.7M**

Amount diverted from the police budget in January to purchase a hotel that will be converted into homes for the unhoused

**60**

Number of units of permanent housing that the converted hotel will maintain

**26%**

Share of Austin’s city budget that will still be spent on the police in 2021

**52%**

Share of the 50 largest cities that increased their police budget for 2021

**50%**

Amount the Seattle City Council vowed to cut from the police budget—before reducing it by only 11 percent

—Shreya Chattopadhyay



CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

## Josh Hawley

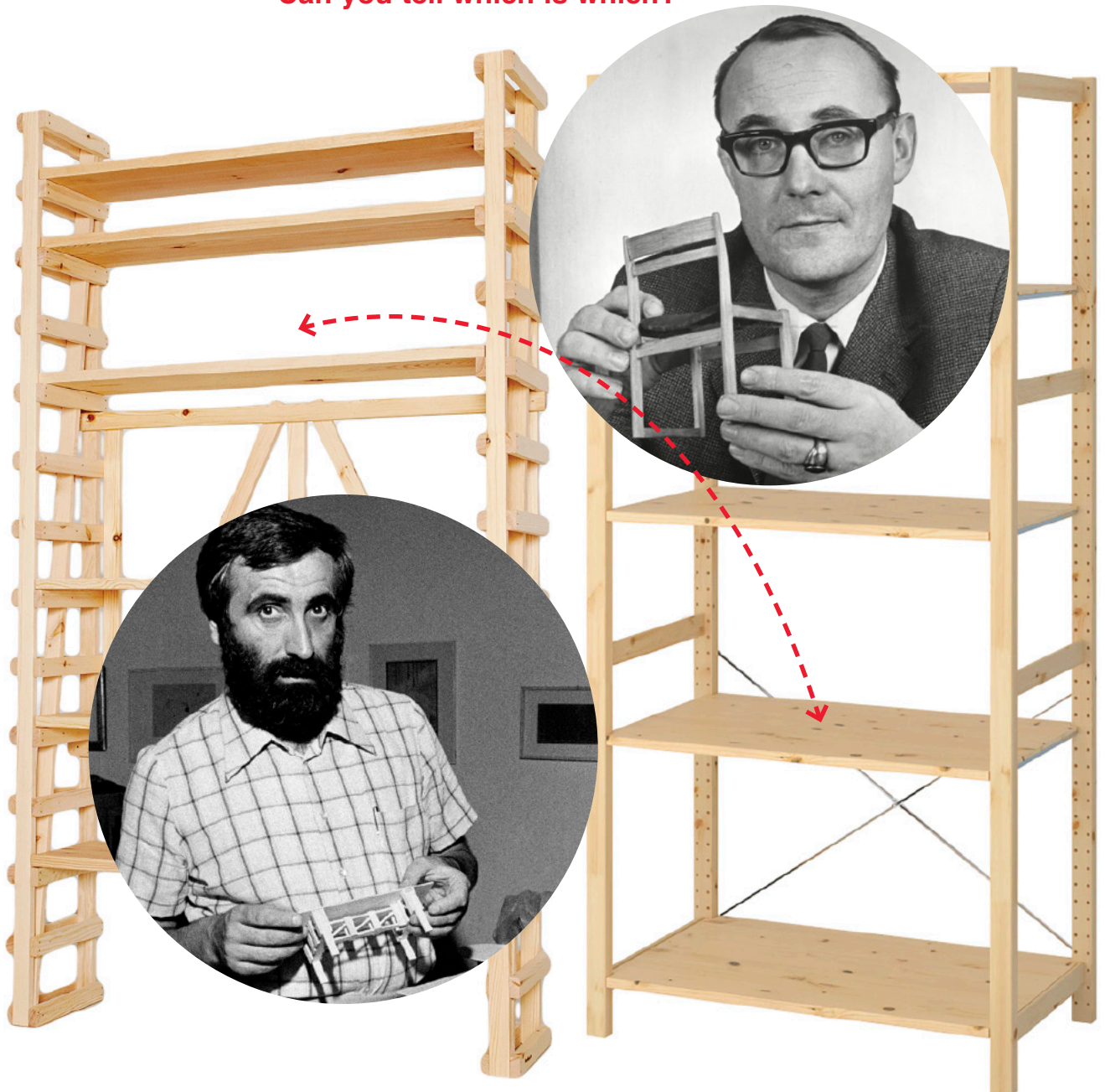
Emerging is Hawley, a smooth politician, But not smooth enough to hide naked ambition. So senators shudder when he makes the news. It’s just what they needed: another Ted Cruz.

# A Tale of Two Bookcases

One of these bookcases was designed by a communist; the other was manufactured by a fascist.

BY **GLENN ADAMSON**

Can you tell which is which?



LET'S BEGIN WITH TWO BOOKCASES.

Both are made of simple, sturdy pine, expediently joined together. One will likely be familiar: It's the primary unit of the Ivar shelving system, which has been manufactured by the Swedish megabrand IKEA since the late 1960s. Its name rhymes with that of the company's founder, Ingvar Kamprad, who died in 2018. It retails for \$69.

The other shelf, distinguished by its diagonal braces, is part of the *Autoprogettazione* furniture system developed by the Italian designer Enzo Mari. It's a word difficult to translate ("self project," while not particularly grammatical, comes close) but easy to explain. Mari wanted to put the means of production back where he thought they belonged: in the hands of the people. He therefore conceived a family of forms that could be made by anyone out of cheap lengths of pine and some nails, using the simplest of joints.

If the resemblance between these two bookshelves is striking, the ideological disparity between them is far more so. Kamprad had been a Nazi sympathizer as a young man, beginning his close association with Sweden's fascists in 1942, when he was 16. After the war, he remained a political conservative, and of course, the company he founded is now seen as the friendly face of consumer capitalism. Mari, by contrast, was a committed Marxist. Upon his passing last October, he was widely hailed as the conscience of design, someone who had spent his life castigating his fellow product designers for their craven subservience to the profit motive in no uncertain terms. "What producers make today is shit," he said in a 2015 interview, "because they eat shit.... I worked half my life to ensure that the world would not be what it is today."

How is it possible that two bookshelves, all but identical in appearance and construction, can exemplify both left-wing critical design and the world's most successful capitalist furniture-manufacturing strategy? That question becomes more provocative still when one considers both the Ivar and *Autoprogettazione* as manifestations of modernism, the movement that emerged in

the 1920s with a program of egalitarian functionalism. Kamprad's famed manifesto, "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer" (published in 1976, just two years after Mari's DIY plans), is the quintessential expression of those themes: Create a better life for the many; do more with less; simplicity is a virtue. Mari, too, espoused those values. He created hundreds of designs, always simple in conception, practical in use, and affordable in price—children's games, plastic vases, pencil holders—manufactured by big brands like

Danese, Artemide, and Zanotta. Even Italians who don't know his name know his work. It is the stuff of everyday life.

Mari's death was particularly cruel in its timing. A major exhibition of his work, orchestrated by the international superstar curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, had opened just two days earlier at the Milan Triennale, while Italy was being convulsed by the coronavirus pandemic. Apparently Covid-19 is what killed Mari, age 88, along with his wife, the critic and curator Lea Vergine, who died the next day at 82. A tragedy this momentous is bound to make you think. If even the most respected critical project

of the most respected critical designer looks all but indistinguishable from a product made by IKEA, how credible is the whole prospect of politically engaged design? It was perhaps this quandary that the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija had in mind in 2004, when he created a version of the *Autoprogettazione* dining table and chairs in beautifully polished stainless steel. Apart from the material, Tiravanija faithfully followed Mari's instructions. Yet he ended up with something that resembled the hypercommodity sculptures of Jeff Koons.

Design is so bound up with the process of value creation that even the most idealistic project can be claimed by the marketplace. As of this writing, one of the few *Autoprogettazione* tables built under Mari's own supervision was available on 1stDibs for \$22,500. If Mari's experiment has any bite left, it seems to be observed mainly in the breach. As Paola Antonelli, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, commented, "Because it was such a rigorous project, any interpretation that strayed from the principle became a way to also show the weakness of the system."

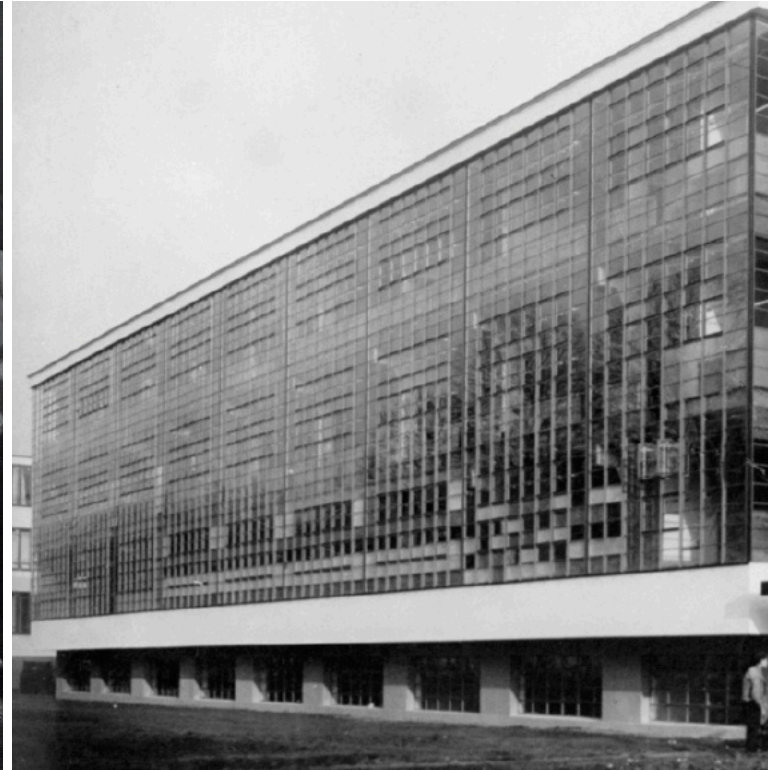
Of course, some might say that Mari had it all wrong and Kamprad had it right: that, practically speaking, designers have to dance to capitalism's tune, so they may as well learn to like it. There is certainly variation across the discipline. Graphic design in particular lends itself to gestures of protest, from punk album covers to handmade banners. But architecture and product design, where the big money is, have always been service businesses. And what they serve is profitability. Mari himself was sustained by commissions from Danese and other companies. He did try to infuse every one of his products with humanistic values and make them affordable. But he was still making commodities, and it pained him. In the above-quoted interview, he mused, "My wife, who is an intelligent woman, totally despises all design. Even what I did." But what other option did he have?

This is the complex legacy of modernism. To understand how it could animate Mari and Kamprad alike, it's worth taking a step back to the moment

**"What producers make today is shit, because they eat shit.... I worked half my life to ensure that the world would not be what it is today."**

—Enzo Mari

Glenn Adamson, a curator and historian based in New York, was previously the director of the Museum of Arts and Design. His latest book is *Craft: An American History*.



of conception, when it was in lockstep with radical politics. The Russian Constructivists embraced abstraction because it was free of the trappings of class hierarchy. They viewed design as the source code for a brave new world, making utilitarian, uniformlike clothing and uncompromisingly austere ceramics—material culture as a tool of radical egalitarianism. Meanwhile, in Germany, designers at the legendary Bauhaus infused machine-age functionalism with a similar sense of urgency. Their famous proclamation that “less is more” was not a mere aesthetic preference. It was a rational defense against conspicuous consumption, a strategy to ensure participation for all.

**Less is more:**  
Bauhaus founder  
Walter Gropius  
critiques a  
student's design.

At birth, modernism was an equal opportunity movement that tried to meet its public on level terms. Its quashing at the hands of reactionary regimes—Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Nazism in Germany—only reinforced its credibility as a politically progressive style. Already in the 1930s, however, this association was getting lost in translation. As the historian Kristina Wilson explains in her book *Livable Modernism*, American industrial designers in the '30s were introducing tubular steel and machine-age styling and marketing it to suburban consumers, albeit hesitantly. Wilson describes how modernism came first to the kitchen and bathroom and was only gradually adopted in the living room and bedroom.

**If modernism had once presented itself as a transparent window onto a better future, postmodernism was more like a shattered mirror, which might prompt self-reflection but offered no hope of a single coherent worldview.**

**B**UT IT WAS NOT UNTIL the postwar era that modernism really began its confusing double life. Still considered the lingua franca of the avant-garde, modernism's foundational principles were taught in progressive art and architecture schools from Cambridge and

Cairo to Tel Aviv and Tokyo. The Bauhaus was reincarnated in Chicago, where faculty from the original school had gathered—a design-world parallel to the displacement of Frankfurt School intellectuals to California and New York. Yet modernism was also becoming the language of authority, broadly applied across the political spectrum. Back in 1932, the Museum of Modern Art had proclaimed modernism to be the “International Style”; in the postwar years, that prediction came true. Hardly a country on earth, no matter its political system, was without its repetitive concrete-and-glass housing projects—which recommended themselves for their cheapness, if nothing else.

This had never been the intention of the first generation of modernists. According to Walter Gropius, the founding director of the Bauhaus, standardization in architecture was desirable, but mainly because it left needed resources for customization. “Suppression of individuality is always shortsighted and unwise,” he wrote in 1924. Postwar architects didn't get that memo. The result was that a program originally developed to improve the lives of the working class was applied thoughtlessly, to dehumanizing effect.

To muddle matters further, modernism also became the approved corporate style of the postwar decades, exemplified by firms like IBM (whose principal design consultant, Eliot Noyes, had studied with Gropius at Harvard). Furniture companies like Herman Miller and Knoll made the Bauhäuslers' dreams a reality, finally putting designs that had originally





Again”). Memphis designs were the antithesis of Mari’s earnest objects. They were not just commodities but hypercommodities—exuberant, camera-ready props for an outrageous lifestyle. They even had names borrowed from luxury hotels: the Plaza vanity, the Hilton trolley, the Bel Air chair.

**T**HOUGH MEMPHIS WAS certainly a group enterprise, both international and cross-generational, its acknowledged leader

was Ettore Sottsass Jr., a creative genius one generation older than Mari and equally as passionate, though more or less in the opposite direction. Sottsass was not particularly ideological except insofar as he was a man of the counterculture. “I have always thought,” he once said, “that design begins where rational processes end and magic begins.”

Sottsass’s most famous design for Memphis, the Carlton bookcase, makes an instructive contrast with Mari’s *Autoprogettazione*. One of the main financial backers of Memphis was Abet Laminati, the Italian equivalent of Formica, and the company’s brightly colored, boldly patterned plastic laminates were featured on nearly every piece of furniture. (Talk about product placement!) The Carlton is like a salesroom sample booklet magically arranged into a serviceable object—though not that serviceable, as its diagonal shelves make a mockery of modernist utilitarianism. (Sottsass joked that books tended to fall over anyway.) If Mari had aimed for a design revolution from below, enacted through the participation of the general public, Memphis was aimed squarely at mass media: The objects’ true function was to capture attention—which they did brilliantly, thanks to the power of reproduction.

Despite its slick appearance, Memphis’s furniture was actually built in traditional artisan workshops. But that didn’t matter, because the pieces had their impact via magazines, not in person. As California’s Peter Shire, designer of the Bel Air chair, once remarked to me, “Memphis was of the media. There was never any trouble with color separations—it always reproduced true, because we were using synthetic colors in the first place. The priority was to go for the image.”

Yet if Memphis ran only skin-deep, that did not necessarily make it superficial. In emphasizing surface so completely, Sottsass and company implied a new theoretical position for design, suggesting that it now had to operate principally in the field of images. This way of thinking (a philosophical current that flows today through a billion Instagram accounts) came to be called “postmodernism,” a term that, while it caused plenty of confusion, also clearly signaled that modernism—at least as a viable avant-garde—was now firmly over. In its place came a somewhat paradoxical combination of liberation and

**“Memphis [designs] always reproduced true, because we were using synthetic colors in the first place. The priority was to go for the image.”**

—Peter Shire

been realized only as handmade prototypes into commercial production. Yet in those pre-IKEA days, such modern objects remained relatively expensive status symbols, which opened up an obvious line of attack. In his 1981 book *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Tom Wolfe lampooned modernism’s progressive bona fides. In one hilarious passage, he mocked the lingering pretense of avant-gardism surrounding the Barcelona chair, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich at the Bauhaus and produced by Knoll beginning in 1947:

The Platonic ideal of chair it was, pure Worker Housing leather and stainless steel, the most perfect piece of furniture design in the twentieth century.... When you saw the holy object on the sisal rug, you knew you were in a household where a fledgling architect and his young wife had sacrificed everything to bring the symbol of the godly mission into their home. Five hundred and fifty dollars!

As so often in his career, Wolfe had his finger right on the pulse, for 1981 also marked a sea change in design history. It was the year that saw the launch of MTV and the DeLorean, as well as Boy George’s first appearance on *Top of the Pops*. Clearly, austere rationalism was about to be shoulder-padded aside. In design, the bellwether event was the inaugural presentation by Memphis, a Milan-based collective named for an ancient city by way of a Bob Dylan song (“Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues

**Product placement:** One of the main backers of Memphis was Abet Laminati, the Italian equivalent of Formica, featured in this Carlton bookcase.



## The central political question about design is just starting to be asked: Who gets to be a designer in the first place?

### Do it yourself:

The point of Mari's *Autoprogettazione*, as seen in this simple chair, is that anyone could build it.

To its detractors, this mindset seemed not only apolitical but positively amoral—a repudiation of designers' fundamental responsibility to make a better world. But to this, the postmodern generation had a convincing rejoinder: Who are we to make a better world? Out went the whole idea of the designer as savior or seer, someone who knows what the people require even when they don't. Ultimately, the legacy of the postmodern adventure would be pervasive doubt.

It's taken a while, but this internal critique has proved to be just what design needed. As the dizzying, relativistic whirl of the '80s wound down, a home truth came to be accepted: By the time something is designed, it is usually too late to determine its political effect. Commodities are principally the outcome of power relations, not the cause of them.

This shift in thinking has prompted a refocusing for the discipline away from objects and toward what is now known as design culture (*la cultura del progetto*, in Italian), the social matrix in which objects are conceived, executed, and distributed. The question initially posed in a spirit of relativism—Who are we to make a better world?—has now been reframed in terms of identity politics: And who exactly is this “we,” anyway?

It will not have escaped the reader that every work discussed in this essay thus far was designed by a white man. But the narrative can be shaped in other ways than an opposition between Kamprad and Mari, right versus left. Double back and look again, and you can find a more complex, nonlinear history. In this revisionist account, which is itself informed by postmodern pluralism—a look through the fragmentary rearview mirror—the global proliferation of the International Style is nuanced at every turn by local concerns. Among its compelling scenes: Turkish

self-critique. The most widely cited one-liners of the postmodern era were “less is a bore” (the architect Robert Venturi's riposte to the functionalist credo) and “the death of the author.” Add those together, and what do you get? Maximalism unfettered by earnestness. The era's most savage parody—a book that makes Wolfe seem tame by comparison—was Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho*, featuring a serial-killing antihero who is obsessed with brand names and seems to possess no inner life whatsoever. (He does, however, have a Sottsass telephone.)

**T**HE TERM “POSTMODERNISM” FIRST CIRCULATED IN architectural circles and was also freely applied to fashion, graphic design, even music. (The emphasis on the mediated image also shows up in the names of bands and magazines of the era: Television, Visage, Talking Heads, *The Face*, *i-D*.) As the 1980s boomed-and-busted their way into the '90s, though, modernism returned with a vengeance. Once again, it became the lingua franca of architecture and product design. The difference was that now everyone saw it clearly for what it was: just another style, no more inherently progressive than any other.

If modernism had once presented itself as a truth machine, a transparent window onto a better future, postmodernism was more like a shattered mirror, which might prompt self-reflection but offered no hope of a single coherent worldview.



metalworkers at Istanbul's Kare Metal Atelier in the 1950s, laboriously reshaping plumbing pipes and construction rebar into modernist furniture; the potters Maria and Julian Martinez in the American Southwest, developing their distinctive black-on-black ceramics on the basis of archaeological findings; Indian weavers making white khaddar (homespun cotton cloth) with the encouragement of Mahatma Gandhi. The focus shifts away from men like Gropius, Mari, and Sottsass to the women who sought to synthesize modernist rationalism with vernacular craft, such as Clara Porset in Mexico; Lina Bo Bardi, an Italian expatriate in Brazil (and staunch communist in her own right); and Charlotte Perriand, a native of Paris who conducted extensive research in Brazil, Korea, and Japan.

But rewriting history will only take us so far, as the central political question about design is just starting to be asked: Who gets to be a designer in the first place? When Venturi was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1991, his partner, Denise Scott Brown, was not recognized; in 2013, a highly publicized petition was circulated demanding redress, with Venturi's own vocal support. In 2018, the #MeToo movement came to architecture, with sexual misconduct allegations lodged against Richard Meier, the neomodernist who designed Atlanta's High Museum and the Getty Center in Los Angeles. Stella Lee, one of Meier's accusers, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed that there was an even deeper problem in the discipline's way of doing business: the low pay, the sleepless nights, the pervasive gender discrimination. “To really effect change,” she wrote, “we need to focus on culture, and where it is solidified.”

**S**O FAR, THAT CHANGE seems to be slow in coming. The Pritzker jury refused the Scott Brown petition, though this has arguably harmed the prize more than the cause of feminism. (Shelley McNamara and Yvonne Farrell, of the firm Grafton Architects, did win the Pritzker last year, making them just the fourth and fifth women to join the list of laureates in over four decades.) Meier's firm seemed to take shockingly little responsibility for his actions, allowing him to remain as its majority shareholder. Meanwhile, recent surveys indicate that women hold only 17 percent of the leadership positions in architecture firms and only 11 percent in design studios.



Matters are even worse with respect to ethnic diversity. The representation of African Americans in the profession is only about 3 percent (compared with approximately 13 percent of the US population). A group called *Where Are the Black Designers?* has formed to advocate for change and draw attention to practitioners who are active in the field. This year, I've been cohosting an interview series with Stephen Burks called "Design in Dialogue," presented by the New York gallery Friedman Benda. One of our goals is to foreground the voices of women and people of color. Burks is the ideal partner, one of the few African Americans prominent in furniture and product design. When I asked him about his experiences as a pioneer, he focused on the problem of tokenism: "When one person breaks through, that doesn't necessarily make space for a diversity of voices." He also described a tendency to view ethnicities as monocultures, as if there were a single Black voice or point of view. When it comes to diversity, design doesn't need just a few more positive role models; it needs a total sea change. The mirror may have been shattered, but the glass ceiling is barely showing any cracks.

Given the state of the environment, however, maybe we should just. Stop. Designing. Entirely. Or if we absolutely must continue—and this comes close to Mari's position toward the end of his life—focus our efforts on damage limitation.

Here's the thing, though: That ain't gonna happen. I remember when Joris Laarman, a young Dutch designer whose wizardry and sophistication with digital tools is unparalleled, was asked how could he possibly justify making another chair. Laarman's reply was simple: "That's like saying there are plenty of songs already, so why do we need to compose another one?" It wasn't a totally convincing answer,

given that songs don't end up in landfills. But as an observation about human behavior, it certainly rang true. There will always be an appetite for new culture, objects included. It's just how humans are built, and there is no redesigning that.

Arguably, this is where design really comes into its own as a contemporary political instrument: It is our best tool for achieving an intelligent balance between the competing pressures of sustainability and desire. Another prominent Dutch designer, Hella Jongerius, took on this topic with the educator Louise Schouwenberg in their 2017 manifesto, "Beyond the New." The document self-consciously echoes the utopian declarations of the historical avant-garde. "Terms like 'authenticity' and 'sustainability' become empty verbiage when the hidden agenda is still, as usual, economic returns," they write. "Imagine a future where shared ideals and moral values point the way!" Jongerius and Schouwenberg go on to describe contemporary design as little more than "a depressing cornucopia of pointless products, commercial hypes around presumed innovations, and empty rhetoric." (One can imagine Mari nodding in agreement, for once.) Finally, they call for a return to—drumroll, please—modernism! "We have lost sight of the higher ideals that were so central to the most influential movement by far in industrial design. The Bauhaus ideals—making the highest possible quality accessible to many people—were based on the intimate interweaving of cultural awareness, social engagement, and economic returns." Jongerius and Schouwenberg aren't advocating a literal return to modernist design, of course, but rather arguing that economic viability was a necessary condition, not a goal, and that novelty for its own sake was worse than worthless.

**T**HOUGH "BEYOND THE New" was published three years ago, today it is more persuasive than

ever. The Museum of Modern Art's Paola Antonelli and the critic Alice Rawsthorn have initiated a project called Design Emergency, drawing attention to the discipline's attempts to respond to the intertwined crises of racism, climate

(continued on page 31)

**Means and ends:**  
The twin coffins created for Enzo Mari and Lea Vergine by the designer Martino Gamper.

**"Terms like 'authenticity' and 'sustainability' become empty verbiage when the hidden agenda is still, as usual, economic returns."**

—Hella Jongerius and Louise Schouwenberg



The  
**Lavish**  
Pleasures  
of  
**Natalie Wynn**

## The YouTube star just wants to redistribute the goddamn champagne.

BY LIZA FEATHERSTONE

**N**ATALIE WYNN KNOWS THAT PEOPLE CAN CHANGE. AFTER ALL, SHE sometimes jokes, she was a “male alcoholic” until 2017. A 32-year-old trans woman, she’s now a wildly popular political YouTuber. Her channel, *ContraPoints*, was a cultural bright spot of the Trump era, and she may be one of the few people in the left media who can credibly claim to persuade her opponents on occasion. Her videos are also—in a left-media ecosystem of scolds and ascetics—a lavish pleasure to watch.

I met Wynn over Zoom just after the Capitol riot and before Joe Biden’s inauguration. In her videos, Wynn’s aesthetic is elaborate and campy, her speech theatrical and well-performed, her look one of high glamour. But like most iconic performers, in person her beauty was simpler. Her makeup was precise and inconspicuous. She wore a black, lacy, floral blouse and her hair in a bun. She spoke with a bit of girlish uptalk and sometimes rambled excitedly.

Though Wynn’s channel—and fame—are less than five years old, her fascination with YouTube goes back much further. More than a decade ago, she recalled, she was “embarrassingly interested” in New Atheism, one of the first political subcultures to have a major YouTube presence. A militantly anticlerical movement whose best-known adherents were Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, New Atheism represented a backlash against the George W. Bush presidency and the September 11 attacks. As a reaction to religious fundamentalism, New Atheism was attractive to many, like Wynn, who leaned left. But it didn’t take long, she said, to become disillusioned with those “sexist Islamophobes who think they are the most rational people since Voltaire.”

**“We had gone from  
‘Creationists DESTROYED  
with facts and logic’ to  
‘Feminists DESTROYED  
with facts and logic.’”**

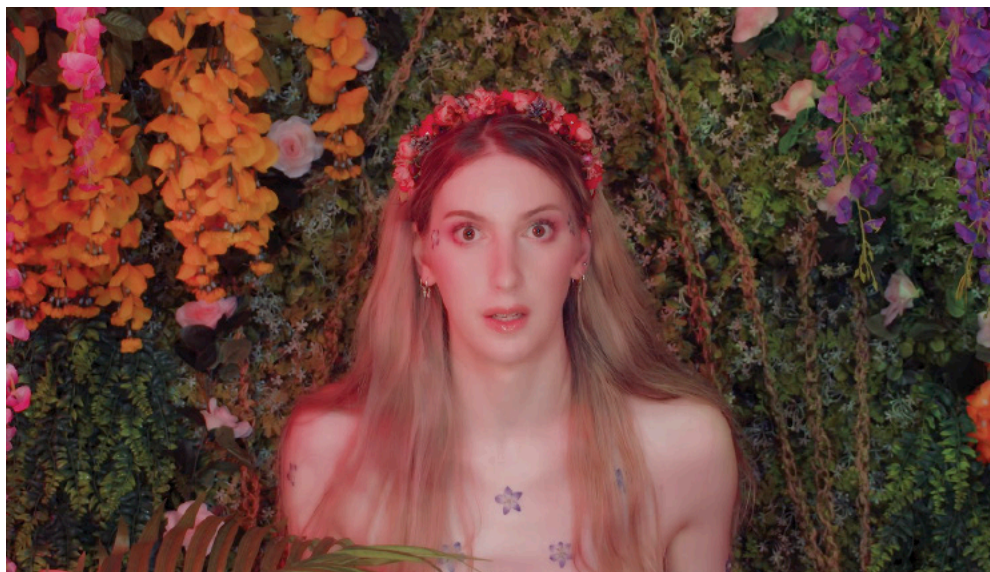
—Natalie Wynn

to her former intellectual community. Because she had once subscribed to New Atheist channels, YouTube’s algorithm was feeding her content that the predominantly white male online groups had since embraced. “We had gone from ‘Creationists DESTROYED with facts and logic’ to ‘Feminists DESTROYED with facts and logic’ to ‘White genocide is happening. We need to defend the race,’” Wynn said. Her old online circles were flirting with fascism and white nationalism. “It was alarming. And no one seemed to be talking about it. No one seemed to be resisting it.”

At the time, the mainstream media appeared titillated by the growth of the alt-right, publishing fawning profiles of Richard Spencer as the “dapper hipster putting a smile on white nationalism,” Wynn said. There were a few left voices on YouTube, mostly a handful of feminists whose earnest videos were the targets of mass-abuse campaigns by the right. On Twitter, “SJWs”—an Internet acronym for “social justice warriors,” or people known for calling out others for breaches of political correctness—preached to the choir at best, and at worst enraged even their sympathizers with their admonishing, hectoring style.

**W**YNN, WHO BEGAN posting videos on the *ContraPoints* channel in 2016, portrayed this discursive nightmare in a 2017 post titled “Debating the Alt-Right,” in which Jackie Jackson, a “classical liberal” talk-show host, moderates a discussion between “prominent tweeter and author” Saul Salzman and Fritz, a genderqueer neo-Nazi alt-righter. Salzman won’t engage with the Fritz’s ideas; he simply berates Jackson for even allowing the Nazi on the air. Fritz denies being a Nazi, remains polite, and gaslights hilariously—“Well, who hasn’t, in a spirit of irony and exuberance, dressed up as a Nazi once or twice?”—as Salzman grows increasingly outraged. Jackson takes her alt-right guest’s views seriously and reproaches Salzman for calling Fritz a Nazi. In the end, all assertions unchallenged, the Nazi wins, and in a nod to *Rhinoceros*, Eugène Ionesco’s 1959 absurdist drama about the rise of fascism, Salzman has a vision of Jackson, her head transformed into a rhinoceros’s head, as Fritz looks on approvingly. (In Ionesco’s play, the main character is criticized for pointing out that everyone around him is turning into a rhinoceros—yet in the end, he’s the only human left.) The sketch dramatized the problem that Wynn set out to address on *ContraPoints*: So many on YouTube seemed either to be becoming Nazis or were complicit in denying the fascist presence.

Another early video features Wynn pretending to have a conversation with The Golden One, a Swedish Nazi YouTuber and bodybuilder with more than 110,000 followers. In it, she performs a naive insouciance to show the absurdity of his racist and masculinist ideology, and the video culminates with her asking him how to become an “alpha male” and then pouring milk all over her face. “Those early videos had such an unhinged energy to them,” Wynn recalled. And they were unique on left YouTube at the time. “It’s just a very different approach from being like”—here she adopted a quavering millennial voice—“This is literally fascism and, like, I’m very upset that you would say this.”



Instead, she continued, “my stylistic choice was to out-edge the edgelords.” “Edgelord” is Internet-speak for a person espousing deliberately shocking or offensive views, and while the term is a derogatory one, in the early Trump years, “edge” was the best way to compete in the attention economies of YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit. This is partly how the alt-right became such a formidable cultural and political force. As Susan Stryker, a trans activist and scholar of trans history, politics, and culture at Mills College, told me, “The sensibility of the so-called alt-right or populist right is, ‘Hey, we’re going to own the libtards, and they don’t even get that we’re making fun of them.’ Then for Natalie to say, ‘Dude, I see you, I understand your style, I’m just going to flip it back on you’—that was brilliant. The idea of an aesthetic intervention, not just an argumentative intervention, was genius.”

Wynn’s approach has been a huge success. In 2019, she asked on Twitter whether her work had helped people to change their minds, and numerous viewers spoke up with their stories. She regularly hears from people who say they were on the alt-right and that her videos helped convince them to move left. Some have become

**Under the influence:** Natalie Wynn says her videos draw from David Lynch movies, fashion advertisements, and MTV.

her friends. As a result, she said, she has people in her circle who were “wearing MAGA hats a few years ago.”

“You’re going to laugh when I say this,” ventured Steve Duncombe, a professor at New York University and author of the recently rereleased book *Dream or Nightmare: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, “but hear me out: *ContraPoints* reminds me of Franklin Roosevelt’s fireside chats.”

In FDR’s time, explained Duncombe, who is currently researching pro-New Deal propaganda, radio was “filled with snake oil salesmen...quacks and demagogues and all sorts of trashy stuff,” just as YouTube is today. FDR’s radio addresses were effective because “he respects that the audience for radio has the capacity to think and reason.” Wynn, Duncombe added, “understands the medium of YouTube” and also knows its audience can think deeply about gender and capitalism. She can therefore speak directly to a public that wouldn’t have encountered these ideas in any other way.

*ContraPoints* conveys a belief in the power of logic and reason but also the emotional intelligence to know they are not enough. Wynn understands that opinions come

from a deeply affective place, often a raw and lonely one. In a video on incels (short for “involuntary celibates,” heterosexual men who can’t find women and whose misogynistic rage often leads them to far-right politics), Wynn delves into the pain and self-hatred of these Internet communities, empathizing as someone who has spent time with alienated men but also as a trans woman, a member of a marginalized group familiar with rejection and insecurity.

The left YouTuber Caleb Cain, formerly an alt-right YouTuber, has credited Wynn with his political conversion, citing her empathy for the disaffected young men like himself in her audience, when

most on the left just wanted to denounce him for being racist.

**I**N ADDITION TO SUCH POLITICAL TRIUMPHS, the financial success of *ContraPoints* is every casual YouTuber’s dream: Wynn no longer has to have a day job. With 13,595 Patreon supporters at the time of this writing, she’s able to live comfortably in Baltimore and make increasingly high-production videos.

Part of her success is due to her aesthetic. “Thinking back to the cringiest part of my life, one of the things I liked about reading Christopher Hitchens—even when I thought he was being an asshole, as he often was—is that he had this style of writing that was somehow charming.” She aspires to that irresistibility in her own work. Even if viewers disagree with it at first, they may not hate it if they fall in love with the style. She wants her video essays to be about “more than being right,” Wynn said. “It’s also about finding pleasure even in the argument itself.”

This aesthetic is not just about humor, though the jokes are central. Wynn is a classical pianist—in addition to dropping out of Northwestern’s PhD program in philosophy, she also attended Boston’s Berklee College of Music—and sometimes plays in her cinematically opulent videos. (Political YouTube is normally so visually dull that it’s often unclear why it needs to be a visual medium at all.) Wynn offers much for the viewer to see, citing a range of influences that include music videos, David Lynch, fashion advertisements, and “weird old VHS recordings of drag shows in New York in the ’80s.”

“No one’s really that original,” she added, “but what makes an artist boring and derivative is when they have too few influences.” What an artist ideally wants, she explained, is for the viewer to ask, “What the fuck is this combination of things I’m looking at?”

**“The idea of an aesthetic intervention, not just an argumentative intervention, was genius.”**

—Susan Stryker,  
trans activist and  
professor at Mills College

Wynn doesn't just stand out on YouTube; she laments the dour solemnity of the left more generally. "One thread within leftism that I've always kind of hated is this: There's this moralistic almost-puritanism. Sometimes there's this suspicion of glamour—a suspicion of beauty, even—because that's seen as decadent and bourgeois. And I hate that. I much prefer the Oscar Wilde division of leftism. Part of what makes human life worth living is not simply having enough food but...aesthetic excess."

We talked about this renunciatory quality to left culture and how it hasn't always been this way—remember sex, drugs, and rock and roll? So much about the 1960s and '70s counterculture was, as Wynn put it, an "artistically daring celebration of life." In one of her videos on capitalism, she makes clear how her love of luxury fits into her leftist economic vision. "Actually, champagne socialism is good," she tells viewers. "But I'm not talking about the champagne classes becoming socialist. I'm talking about redistributing the goddamn champagne."

Another reason Wynn is such a successful left-media creator is her acute awareness of her audience. "When I started making these videos, there was no such thing as LeftTube," she said, "and so I was making videos for RightTube. I was gaining followers by conversion." Even now, she wants to reach TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists), the alt-right, and men on the verge of becoming alt-right.

Yet as her audience has grown among the already converted—trans people, liberals, the

left—her prominence sometimes draws criticism and even cancellation, a theme she's addressed in her videos. This can be painful. Wynn is used to personal and disturbing online attacks. Sometimes they come from transphobes or Nazis, which actually makes them easier to handle than criticism from the left, she said. "It's in some ways less psychologically hurtful, because it's like, 'Well, I'm making the Nazis angry.' There's a sense of a valiant victimhood that comes with that." But when the left tells her, "'Oh, you're a horrible person, you're just a rich Karen profiting off of dead trans women'—these crazy things that leftists sometimes say to me bother me more."

Yet Wynn told me she's also learned from the critiques. As her audience has grown, she's come to understand that the larger platform entails some responsibilities. She used to feel "entitled," she said, to state her opinion, whatever it might be. A specific incident about a year and a half ago changed her mind. After Wynn tweeted that she didn't like being asked what pronouns she uses, the Internet blew up in rage: Many trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary people have been fighting for years to make asking about pronouns a common and easy matter of etiquette. Wynn said she now realizes that "I don't get to tweet that and have it just be an opinion. That's not the effect it has." The effect of that tweet, for example, might have been to further marginalize anyone who wouldn't want their pronouns assumed.

It could also suggest to the cis public that pronouns don't matter or that asking about them might even give offense. Wynn certainly didn't intend any of that, but there  
*(continued on page 30)*



**The converted:** YouTuber Caleb Cain credits Wynn's empathy toward alienated young men with helping him to abandon the alt-right.

**"Print media is not as big of a thing as it used to be. YouTube is more of the moment."**

—Natalie Wynn



# Roads Blocked

As the pandemic raged, the obstacles to accessing abortion became even harder to surmount.

BY AMY LITTLEFIELD

**T**HE DOOR OF THE PLANNED PARENTHOOD CLINIC IN COLUMBUS WAS locked when Larada Lee arrived for the first of two appointments she needed to get an abortion under Ohio state law. About a dozen anti-choice protesters had gathered outside, without masks, calling Lee a baby killer as she approached the door. Lee felt nauseated from her pregnancy, at times unable to keep down even water. Her bones ached. She was missing her classes at Ohio State University. The fatal shootings of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor in recent weeks were weighing her down with a sense of hopelessness. Meanwhile, Ohio officials had sparked confusion by ordering a halt to “nonessential” abortions. “Being Black in the middle of trying to

seek an abortion in the middle of a pandemic—it was really difficult to navigate all of those feelings while also trying to focus on ‘I hope that they don’t take this away from us,’” Lee said in a recent interview with *The Nation*, recalling her experience back in March and April. The day before, when she went to an urgent care clinic wearing her hijab, the white male doctor had seemed to belittle her, calling her brave for coming out in a pandemic just to get a pregnancy test. “You could tell that they just were being, like,

really short because it wasn’t at the forefront of their concerns—which, it was at the forefront of mine, because I’m pregnant in the middle of a pandemic,” Lee said.

She felt clear about her decision to have an abortion. But her path was full of obstacles sown by the collision of the pandemic and state laws designed to make having an abortion as prolonged and difficult as possible. After finding the door

locked, Lee called the clinic from the parking lot. The next available appointment was a month and a half away, she was informed. A clinic escort told her the doctor Lee was supposed to see that day was sick. The country was in chaos.

“I went home, broke down, and cried,” Lee said.

**A**BORTION ACCESS WAS IN crisis in the United States before the Covid-19 pandemic. In many states, getting an abortion can involve waiting periods of up to three days, unnecessary visits to a clinic, counseling sessions rife with false information, trips of hundreds of miles, and bans that force patients to raise hundreds of dollars. When Covid and the ensuing economic recession hit, each unnecessary trip or encounter with staff became an additional infection risk, and many patients faced these barriers with fewer financial resources than ever.

The early weeks of the pandemic became what many advocates saw as a dry run for the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court case that legalized abortion and is now in greater peril than ever after the confirmation of Justice Amy Coney Barrett. Several

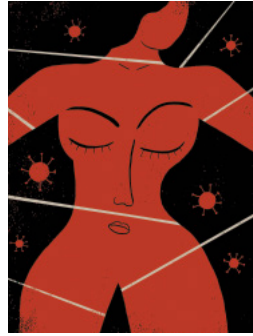
The early weeks of the pandemic became what many advocates saw as a dry run for the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.

*Amy Littlefield is a freelance journalist who focuses on reproductive health care.*





states tried to use Covid as a pretext for banning abortion as a nonessential service under the guise of preserving personal protective equipment. “The brutality of it was terrible to experience,” said Dr. Amna Dermish, regional medical director of Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas. “We talk about the end of *Roe v. Wade* a lot...but nobody really thinks it’s going to happen or really understands what that looks like when it happens. We had the unfortunate experience to see what that looked like.” In Texas, a legal battle over



the state’s attempt to shutter clinics prompted a revolving door of closures and reduced services that Elizabeth Gelvin, the client and community coordinator at the New Orleans Abortion Fund, called “the most sickening game of whack-a-mole we’ve ever seen played on a grand scale.” Over a period of four weeks, abortion access was switched on and off eight times. The ensuing chaos sent patients scattering across the country. Some saw their appointments canceled without notice as they sat in clinic waiting rooms.

“I was just completely stunned,” she recalled, “and then just kind of collapsed into tears because I couldn’t process it.” Dermish’s staff became, in her words, “agents of the state’s cruelty.” One by one, they called patients to tell them that their abortions had been canceled and that they didn’t know when they could be rescheduled. “To call somebody and tell them that you have to cancel their abortion appointment—I mean, this is a life-changing decision,” Dermish said. “To have that capacity for self-determination taken away from you is traumatizing.” Even worse, as the legal battle raged over the next month, access to abortion in Texas disappeared, then came back for a matter of hours, then was gone again. There were stretches when medication abortions and procedures close to the state’s 22-week gestational limit were allowed, and times when they were not.

“We were regularly telling patients in the waiting room who were there for their medication abortions, ‘Actually, sorry—turns out an hour ago we could have done your medication abortion, but now we can’t,’” Dermish said. Once, her phone rang during her last abortion procedure of the day; when she called back, she learned that the ban was back in place. “That was March and April for us.”

The ban in Texas prompted a scattered migration of patients aided by networks of clinic staff members and people like Sarah Lopez, the program coordinator at Fund Texas Choice. “Usually, if someone is going out of state, they’re going to New Mexico or Colorado, every now and then to D.C. But I was sending folks to Oklahoma, to Kansas, to Arkansas,” Lopez said. Data provided by Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains shows a surge in Texas patients who made their way to Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada during those tumultuous weeks, with 212 people

**“What we’re seeing now is, people have nothing. They’re barely making it—and then they find out that they’re pregnant.”**

—Kelly Nelson,  
Tampa Bay Abortion Fund

**Roe in peril:** With Amy Coney Barrett confirmed to the Supreme Court in October, the *Roe* decision has never been under greater threat.

strangers who risked their own health to pick them up at airports. In increasing numbers, people flocked to the Internet for help, sharing information on how to access abortion-inducing pills by mail from overseas pharmacies and a burgeoning array of online clinics in the United States.

On the ground, meanwhile, clinics in hostile states scrambled to shift their protocols and protect staff while grappling with the nationwide shortage of PPE and slogging through court battles to fend off the states’ attempts to shutter them. South Dakota’s last abortion clinic, which relies on fly-in providers from out of state, went dark for seven months. All of this provoked an onslaught of calls to staff members and volunteers at abortion funds, who engaged in acts of unseen heroism to preserve access.

Still, according to Yamani Hernandez, executive director of the National Network of Abortion Funds, the pandemic has confirmed that “the system is just broken.... People have had this sort of talking point of, you know, ‘Abortion funds are the network on the ground that is going to make abortion access possible,’ and I think that that is true. But it’s also a very precarious network.”

**D**ERMISH WAS SITTING AT HER DINING table when she heard the news. On March 23, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton announced a ban on all abortions in the state that weren’t “medically necessary to preserve the life or health of the mother.”



doing so in April, compared with just 16 in February before the ban. Overall, 947 Texas residents made it to out-of-state facilities in April, according to a research letter published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Many more saw their care delayed; in May, the study found, after the ban was lifted, there was an 83 percent jump in abortions at 12 or more weeks.

Lopez said her cli-

ents were lured by offers of free ultrasounds to anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centers that were allowed to operate even as abortion clinics were being shuttered. As they traveled out of state, some patients were still being hounded by calls from anti-choice activists who wanted them to keep their pregnancies. Then there was the crushing economic fallout from the pandemic. In 2019, 58 percent of callers who received help from the Lilith Fund, another abortion fund in Texas, were employed; during the pandemic, that share dropped to 39 percent. The amount that the fund gave these callers increased, as did the distance they traveled, from 158 miles on average in 2019 to 272 miles during the period from March to October 2020.

Elsewhere in the country, other abortion funds saw a similar level of economic devastation. “What we’re seeing now is, people have nothing,” said Kelly Nelson, cofounder of Tampa Bay Abortion Fund in Florida. “The bulk of the ones that are calling us have been affected by Covid. They’re unemployed, they’ve had other issues, they’re barely making it—and then they find out that they’re pregnant.”

Faced with this mountain of financial and logistical barriers, an untold number of people could not get the care they needed. “If I’m being honest, some teens during the abortion ban did end up continuing pregnancies that they didn’t want to continue, because it was just impossible for them to get care,” said Rosann Mariappuram, the executive director of Jane’s Due Process, an organization that helps minors in Texas navigate the parental consent laws on abortion and birth control. Teens in Texas whose parents can’t or won’t sign off on their abortions, as state law requires, must apply for a judicial bypass. Despite the pandemic, they must sometimes appear in person in front of a judge after they have already undergone an ultrasound conducted by the doctor who will perform their abortion. The whole process, including the abortion, takes about three weeks. Mariappuram can’t say how many people stayed pregnant because of these barriers, but she does know that in March, almost a third of the organization’s callers simply dropped off.

**P**ROVIDERS ELSEWHERE NOTICED THIS, too: Certain patients seemed to disappear. In New Mexico, Dr. Lisa Hoffer noticed a dramatic decrease in the number of Indigenous patients who were making it to the University of New Mexico Center for Reproductive Health, where she is the medical director. The clinic’s staffers had braced for an influx of out-of-state patients and managed to safely see two and a half times as many people in April as they had in any month before the pandemic, Hoffer said. “The



people that I noticed not being there were our Native patients.” (In New Mexico, Native people make up 11 percent of the population.) “It felt like the Native people didn’t make it.”

In fact, Native American reservations were decimated by the pandemic. The Navajo Nation, in May, had the highest per capita infection rate of anywhere in the country. Tribal governments sought to contain the toll by locking down, in some cases requiring a doctor’s note for residents to leave for medical appointments. Tribal members who needed abortions turned to the abortion fund at Indigenous Women Rising, a reproductive justice organization cofounded by Rachael Lorenzo. The organization became a bridge between clinics and tribes, negotiating to get providers to send doctor’s notes on letterhead that would protect the patient’s privacy. “Abortion care is already hard to come by for Indigenous people,” Lorenzo said. “Now we’re having to get creative with how we make that a reality for [patients] while respecting their tribes’ sovereignty.”

On the day I spoke with Lorenzo, they were helping four patients seek care in three states—New Mexico, Colorado, and North Dakota. Two calls came in during the first half-hour or so of our call. Lorenzo, who has two other jobs and two kids, is proud of what their group was able to achieve against seemingly insurmountable odds. One moment from the summer stands out: A patient had been trying for months to get the money for

**Pregnant in a pandemic:** When Larada Lee went for an abortion in March, the clinic door was locked—the doctor was sick.

**“Some teens did end up continuing pregnancies that they didn’t want to continue, because it was just impossible for them to get care.”**

—Rosann Mariappuram,  
Jane’s Due Process

an abortion together and had been pushed to 26 or 27 weeks of pregnancy, which meant there were only a few clinics in the country where she could get care. Then, when she finally had the money, her car wouldn't work. So "someone donated their time as an airplane pilot and flew to Montana and picked up the patient at a small airport, which was like 20 minutes away from her home, because she didn't have a reliable car to drive all the way from Montana to Colorado."

**B**EFORE THE PANDEMIC, DR. SARAH TRAXLER HAD A STRAIGHTFORWARD ROUTINE during the one week a month when she was South Dakota's only abortion provider: Her husband would drive her to the train station, and she would head to the airport and board a plane from Minneapolis to Sioux Falls. Traxler would fly in on Mondays, counsel patients at the Planned Parenthood clinic there, then fly home. On Thursdays, she would fly back to see the same patients she had met with earlier in the week. Under a decade-old South Dakota law, these patients had to meet with a doctor, sign a lengthy consent form laden with information designed to convince them not to proceed, and then wait 72 hours before having their abortion performed by the same doctor.

For 25 years, the clinic has relied on providers like Traxler, because the doctors who live in the state and are willing to perform abortions at the clinic are banned from doing so by their employers. Traxler and three other providers each covered one week per month.

Then Covid hit. "We made the decision to suspend services in South Dakota until we had a little better understanding of what the impact of Covid would be on people who were traveling," Traxler said.

The clinic suspended abortions in March. Seven months later, it found a provider willing to travel to Sioux Falls once a month. But it's unclear whether that will continue. "I hope that we'll be able to survive it," said Sarah Stoesz, the CEO of Planned Parenthood North Central States. "I just don't know, though, because even without the pandemic, the financial burden of ensuring abortion access in South Dakota is becoming somewhat insurmountable, frankly. And I say that with a terribly heavy heart."

**Access for all:** Rachael Lorenzo is a cofounder of Indigenous Women Rising, an abortion fund serving Native Americans.

South Dakota is one of the states where the dress rehearsal for the end of *Roe* started years ago. Many patients were already traveling out of state to avoid the 72-hour waiting period. "I feel like the last 20 years have been a practice run with them chipping away at access," said Kim, who helped launch a new abortion fund in South Dakota called the Justice Through Empowerment Network (JEN) and asked us to withhold her last name. "It's to the point that now, if it goes away, it's like this tiny little beeping light that will just go out."

If that happens, it could mean more trips like the one Will and Caitlin Anderson made one morning in July, when they put their sons in the back of their car and drove to meet a stranger two hours from their home in Sioux Falls to take her to her abortion appointment in Fargo, N.D. For hours, they drove past cornfields and a number of billboards that admonished them to choose life. Will thought about the law—already on the books in South Dakota—that would ban abortion and make facilitating it a felony under state law if *Roe* falls.

"If the work that we're doing is potentially a future criminal activity that could land us in jail... if it

comes to that, I don't think we're going to stop," said Will, a self-described gun-toting, bearded bartender who serves on the board of JEN. "I know I don't plan on stopping helping people."

The Sioux Falls clinic had been there for him and Caitlin when she needed an abortion in 2015. They had three kids and couldn't afford another. For Caitlin, the pandemic has underscored "just how heavily we depend on outside forces, and other people, and other people's kindness."

**L**ARADA LEE DESCRIBES HERSELF AS SOMEONE who likes to have a backup plan. That's why she made a second appointment for her abortion at an independent clinic in Columbus, just in case. Two weeks after her appointment at Planned Parenthood fell through, Lee sat in a

waiting room at Your Choice Healthcare, texting her best friend. She looked around at the masked faces of strangers sitting spaced apart; like her, they were alone, their partners and friends banned due to Covid precautions. Lee's friend had refused to leave her and was waiting in the parking lot. Under Ohio law, Lee had to undergo a counseling session, in person, that included

information designed to discourage her from having an abortion. Since her first appointment was on a Friday, she had to wait until the following Monday to return, take the first pill in the clinic, and bring the rest of the medication home.

As she waited, Lee, whom I connected with through the abortion storytelling project Youth Testify, thought about the people who wouldn't be able to manage that. She was missing classes and would end up failing one, but she didn't have to work that day. Since her Ohio Medicaid didn't cover abortion, she'd secured \$400 from the statewide abortion fund Women Have Options.

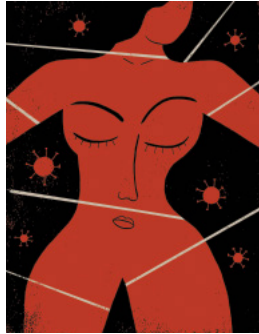
Lee wanted the security of a doctor's guidance, even though she preferred to take the abortion pills at home. What frustrates her is that Ohio law prevented her from having her appointments online. "I risked my health to go out [and] get my abortion pills, and they could have just mailed them to me and I could have done my abortion at home, like I did," Lee said. "Having to go back two to three times for two to three hours at a time was also not the best in a really small room in the middle of a pandemic, even though they were trying to implement social distancing."



**"Even without the pandemic, the financial burden of ensuring abortion access in South Dakota is becoming insurmountable."**

—Sarah Stoesz,  
Planned Parenthood North Central States

For patients who look outside the traditional clinic model, the process can be very different. Tessa (a pseudonym) managed her abortion with the same medications as Lee, using pills delivered to her by the US Postal Service. She'd found out that she was pregnant in the fall, just as she became another of the tens of millions of people who have lost their jobs during the pandemic.



"I'm having an abortion, but I can't afford it," Tessa posted on a Reddit forum dedicated to abortion in November, nine days after the presidential election. Her partner, she explained, had been waiting to receive his unemployment benefits for two months and was regularly calling for updates, to no avail. Meanwhile, she was throwing up anything she tried to eat or drink, spending her days and nights hovering over a bucket or lying in bed. "I'm miserable and really have no one else to turn to," Tessa wrote.

Within hours, strangers posted replies directing her to Aid Access, an organization based in Europe that ships abortion pills around the world. Founded by Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, Aid Access has continued to serve patients in the United States while challenging a cease-and-desist order from the Food and Drug Administration, which seized some of its shipments in 2019. In a handful of states, Aid Access has enlisted US-based doctors to send abortion pills to patients by mail. But in most states, patients navigate a murkier legal territory, e-mailing their Aid Access prescriptions to a pharmacy in India that then ships the pills to them. The commenters suggested that Tessa could get an abortion through the organization for about \$100. She placed an order and, two weeks later, received a pink envelope sealed in plastic. After taking the enclosed pills according to the instructions she'd been given, she started passing blood clots and suffering painful cramps that sent her lurching between the bathroom and her bed. But that didn't stop her from returning to Reddit, offering advice and reassurance to people awaiting packages of their own. "Any questions I'm here for you," she wrote.

This subreddit and a few others like it have become unofficial support groups for people struggling with the challenges of seeking an abortion during a pandemic. Strangers go there to vent, grieve, brainstorm, or ask advice about navigating access to a clinic or buying abortion pills online. Behind the scenes, a group of volunteers coordinates in a private chat group to make sure every question gets at least one accurate and supportive response. Ariella Messing and Kate Bertash had lurked on the platform before launching the Online Abortion Resource Squad

in 2019. Messing, a doctoral student working on a dissertation about abortion funds, and Bertash, the director of the Digital Defense Fund, which provides digital security to the abortion access movement, had noticed a flaw in the existing resources for abortion access: A lot of people simply didn't know about them.

"There are a lot of apps and websites all about abortion, but they assume that people know how to get there," Messing said. "And Reddit seems to be a place that people go to ask anonymous questions, and so we just sort of felt that one way to do

this is to go where people are already."

After Covid struck, Reddit exploded with questions. The pandemic disrupted the Aid Access supply chain, leading people to turn to less proven sources for abortion pills. Messing, Bertash, and their team scrambled to provide reliable answers in a rapidly shifting landscape. As the chaos of the initial weeks subsided, people like Tessa came to the platform to share their experiences with managing their own abortions.

The subreddit reflects a seismic shift in how patients in the United States obtain abortions. In July, because of the pandemic, a federal court temporarily suspended long-standing restrictions that are widely interpreted to require patients to go to a health center in person to pick up mifepristone, the first of two drugs typically used in medication abortions. Advocates recruited doctors

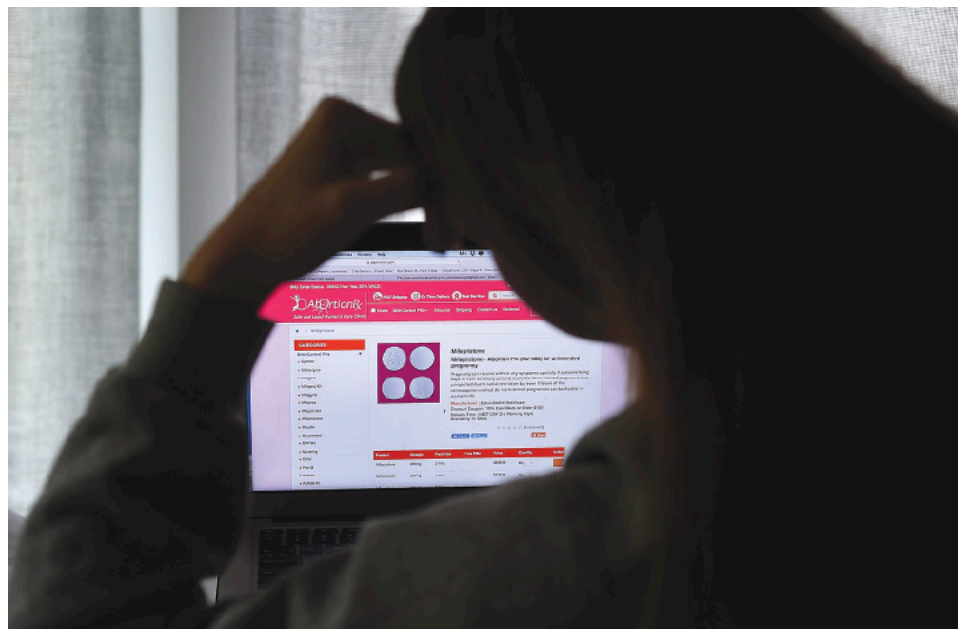
to write prescriptions for abortion medications to be filled by online pharmacies, and digital abortion clinics sprang up, offering telehealth visits and abortions by mail to patients in states with laws that would allow it. Then, on January 12, the Supreme Court reinstated the rule, blocking pharmacies from mailing the pills to patients and casting doubt on this new landscape.

The earlier reprieve offered a glimpse of the dream that Elisa Wells, cofounder of the medication-abortion advocacy group Plan C, has been waiting for since mifepristone was approved for use in the United States in 2000. "Hallelujah for this new model of care, which eliminates those types of barriers and helps to create more equity in access," Wells said. In the wake of the July court decision, digital clinics

**A new landscape:** During the early months of the pandemic, regulators eased restrictions on the provision of abortion medication via telemedicine.

**"All of the states where there are no clinics and no doctors are the same states that have telemed abortion bans."**

—Robin Marty,  
author of *The New Handbook for a Post-Roe America*



started offering consultations and abortion pills by mail for as little as \$199 to patients in states like California, Minnesota, New York, and Washington. The TelAbortion Project, which began shipping the pills before the pandemic as part of a research study, has expanded to 15 states and Washington, D.C. “What we’ve been seeing...are people crossing the border into the TelAbortion states from states that have restrictive laws,” said Tara Shochet, the project’s director.

But within these innovations lie the seeds for an even more divided system. Eighteen states have active laws requiring physicians to be physically present when medication abortion is administered, making remote abortion care impossible. Even if the Biden administration eases the federal restrictions on mifepristone, telemedicine abortions will remain off-limits in many states. “Right now we’re seeing this impression that everybody can access abortion because of telemed expansion,” said Robin Marty, who serves as communications director for the West Alabama Women’s Center. “But all of the states where access is the worst, where there are no clinics and there are no doctors, are the same states that have telemed abortion bans.”

This divide seriously affects how clinics are able to protect their patients and staffs. Amid the pandemic, many shifted their protocols to minimize contact, and some began mailing abortion pills to patients after a telehealth visit. But providers in abortion-hostile states were limited by state law: A study of independent clinics found that while 73 percent of facilities in the Northeast reported that they had started or increased telehealth services during the pandemic, only 23 percent in the South had done likewise.

Advocates hope that the Biden administration will further ease the restrictions on mifepristone even after the pandemic ends, allowing it to be picked up at a pharmacy like other drugs. But the prospects for that and other changes remain unclear. On the campaign trail, Biden

**“Hallelujah for a new model of care, which eliminates barriers and helps to create more equity in access.”**

—Elisa Wells,  
Plan C



reversed his long-standing support of the ban on federal funding for abortion known as the Hyde Amendment, declaring, a day after his campaign had said otherwise, that he could no longer support a policy that made health care access “dependent on someone’s zip code.” Reproductive justice groups hope that Biden will go beyond repealing the Trump-era restrictions on abortion—such as the one that stripped federal family-planning funds from clinics that make abortion referrals—and send Congress a budget that strikes down Hyde, which has been in place for more than 40 years. But even with executive action, the Supreme Court’s likely willingness to uphold even the most onerous state restrictions has left experts like Marty concerned.

“We’re going to see an even greater divide over who can and can’t access abortion,” she said. “We are truly going to have the most inequitable system, even more so than we do now.” **N**

(continued from page 23)  
isn’t much discursive space for her to have “a spicy take” on a subject like this. Anything she says on the subject of trans experience, she acknowledged, “influences the whole public conversation around trans issues because there’s so many people listening to me, especially compared to other trans people.”

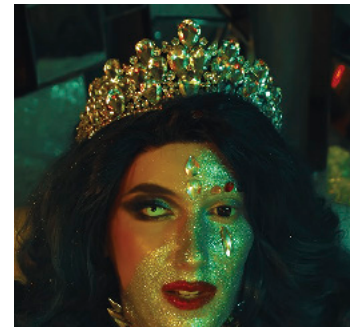
Asked if she’s a *ContraPoints* fan, Stryker, the trans studies professor, laughed and said, “I feel like maybe this is part of the story. I need to be very careful.” Although Wynn had made “slight missteps” in her comments about trans issues and nonbinary identities, Stryker said she too was bothered by the social media discourse around these—and many other—issues. “The broader phenomenon of hungry little piranhas feeling like there’s a little blood in the water and just going into a feeding frenzy is a real problem, you know? And it’s hard to talk about, because you don’t want to play into right-wing tropes about left-wing cancel culture.” Wynn herself noted this paradox in one of her videos: Cancel culture exists, she says, but most of the people who complain about it are “dicknuggets.”

Wynn said she’d like to see the left-opinion ecosystem—perhaps the left in general—become more tolerant, not so much of divergent opinions but of diverse temperaments. She pointed to the feminist scholar Jo Freeman’s famous essay, “Trashing,” in which Freeman notes that left and feminist communities sometimes mistake a conflict of personality for a political difference. “There’s going to be people who want to be very angry and very scoldy, very outraged,” Wynn said. “Some people...want a safe space where they’re made to feel validated and comfortable all the time. And then there’s people who want to make edgy jokes. All these personalities are going to exist. It’s OK if you personally can’t stand what the other person’s doing. You don’t have to like it. But you have to acknowledge that this is not a political struggle—not really.”

For a left-media creator, success can make the question of exactly who your intended audience is a confusing one. “A million people watch my videos every time,” Wynn told me, lowballing the figure (it’s more like 2 million views per video on average, with 1.2 million subscribers to her channel). She did some math and estimated that her videos have about the same audience as 50 consecutive sold-out shows at Madison Square Garden. “Do I have anything to say to an audience that large? And the answer is: Absolutely not.”

So what do you do when your viewers could include just about anyone? How do you speak to both the alt-right and the socialist left? In that regard, the subject of Wynn’s first video

**Cancel culture exists, Wynn says in one of her videos, but most of the people who complain about it are “dicknuggets.”**



of 2021 is well-chosen. J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series and an outspoken TERF, makes an ideal foil. The author's success and popularity, as well as her fluency in banal and mean-spirited gender clichés, make her an effective vehicle to explain why TERF ideology is so hateful and paranoid and not simply a benign difference of opinion. The video is on track to become one of Wynn's most watched, garnering more than 2.3 million views just 10 days after its release.

Wynn has no plans to stop doing *ContraPoints*. "I don't think anything is going to be more creatively rewarding. I have total creative control," she said. In answer to a question I didn't ask, she added that she will "never, ever" run for office—"I'm not the right kind of narcissist for that."

Nor is she seriously considering any medium other than the video essay. She's been approached to write a book, but she's not sure it would be worth the commitment. "I've spent so much time now learning to do video essays. Why am I going to switch it out when this is what I've developed as a skill?" Also, she added, obviously struggling to put this tactfully, "print media, I'm sorry to say, is not as big of a thing as it used to be. YouTube is more of the moment. Because it's newer, it's less prestigious. It's not serious. But that's always what people say about new media, right?" When novels first became popular, she continued, they were considered frivolous, a decadent feminine distraction. "And now YouTuber is kind of an embarrassing profession. But in 40 years, there's going to be YouTube studies departments at most major universities. It'll become serious later. If anything, I enjoy the feeling of being part of something now that hasn't yet been museum-ified. It still feels to me like this organic form of popular art." **N**

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(continued from page 19)

change, and the pandemic. They point to epic projects like Boyan Slat's controversial nonprofit, the Ocean Cleanup, which uses a gigantic floating boom to collect seaborne plastic waste and has finally seen some recent success after years of expensive failure, and the Great Green Wall, an 5,000-mile-long tree line that is being planted along the southern border of the Sahara. They also single out smaller-scale grassroots endeavors such as the work of entrepreneur Roya Mahboob, who has sponsored teenage girls in Herat, Afghanistan, to design and make ventilators, and the attempt of the 1,500 residents of Kamikatsu, on the Japanese island of Shikoku, to become a "zero-waste village," recycling or reusing every single thing they use. (They are now reportedly at 80 percent participation and still working on it.)

Antonelli and Rawsthorn are both great admirers of Mari, but they are charting a vision for design that's quite different from his. Their recent guest-edited issue of *Wallpaper*, devoted to the Design Emergency concept, was also stuffed with the usual advertisements for Dior, Chanel, Rolex, and other brands. Clearly, the assumption here is that if we do find a design solution to climate change, it will need to happen within capitalism, at least for the foreseeable future. This is not a bet placed on the radical overhaul of our political and economic systems, but rather on the potential for human ingenuity to make a better world.

**"When one person breaks through, that doesn't necessarily make space for a diversity of voices."**

—Stephen Burks

Whether you find this line of thinking persuasive probably says a lot about your own politics. Speaking only for myself, I will say there is at least one cause for optimism: We have the advantage over previous generations of learning from their mistakes. Perhaps design really can reclaim the progressive vision of the early modernists while avoiding their presumptions about what people want and need, retaining a healthy self-skepticism, and working to increase its diversity, so that the sector more closely resembles the population at large.

Meanwhile, designers continue to navigate this tricky terrain, creating human meaning as they go. When Martino Gamper, an Italian designer now based in London, heard that Mari and Vergine had died, he created a pair of *Autoprogettazione*-style coffins. Like the furniture Mari conceived, they are made of cheap timber and common nails. It was a way, Gamper said, to pay tribute to two great figures and hold them in his mind for a while. "Creating an object for someone you care for and love could be an interesting process for all of us—sawing and hammering, and remembering the person," he explained. They say that the personal is political, and that certainly applies to design at all stages of its production and consumption. Gamper's gesture is a potent reminder that the reverse can also be true. Design is an intimate part of all our lives. We are wedded to it, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part. **N**



## The Lies We Tell Ourselves

*Elena Ferrante's class fictions*

BY JENNIFER WILSON



OVER THE COURSE OF 2018, THE PSEUDONYMOUS Italian novelist Elena Ferrante wrote a weekly column for *The Guardian's Weekend* magazine. The pieces were later collected and published as *Incidental Inventions*, a title sufficiently vague to allow for the capaciousness of her themes; Ferrante wrote on everything from climate change, jealousy, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and botanophobia to Andrei Tarkovsky's Soviet sci-fi classic *Solaris*. The 1972 film, which Ferrante admitted to rewatching "at least once a year," follows the crew of a space station orbiting Solaris, a distant planet that appears to have the power to materialize the subconscious preoccupations



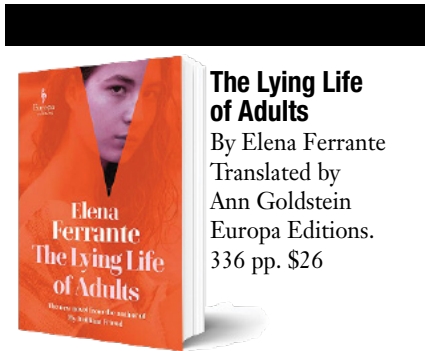
and buried memories of the astronauts on board. A psychologist named Kris Kelvin is dispatched to investigate these disturbing phenomena and wakes up one morning to find his deceased wife, Hari, in his bed and very much alive. In terror, he tries to destroy the phantasm by launching Hari's body into space, only to find her back in his room later that night. In her column, Ferrante wrote about being transfixed by Hari's "serene yet furious refusal to be eliminated." The film's power, she concluded, "lies in the female character, in that memory of a woman who can't vanish into oblivion."

Readers of Ferrante, of which there are many more now thanks to the efforts of her English-language translator, Ann Goldstein, will no doubt find this reading of *Solaris* amusingly appropriate. The image of a woman disappearing and then reappearing as the projection of another person's memory is the backstory of the four novels by Ferrante that came to be known as the Neapolitan quartet: *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*.

*My Brilliant Friend* begins with the sudden disappearance of a 66-year-old woman named Lila Cerullo, a vanishing that shocks everyone but the narrator, Elena, her lifelong friend. She recalls Lila confiding to her 30 years earlier that she wanted to one day "disappear without leaving a trace." The rest of the novel and the three that follow are Elena's attempt to defy that wish, to write down on paper the story of their lives, from children growing up in postwar Naples to adult women navigating marriage, infidelity, motherhood, and Italy's changing political landscape after the fall of Fascism.

In Ferrante's most recent novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, we are pulled yet again into the story with the tale of a missing woman, Aunt Vittoria. Unlike Lila, she has not disappeared altogether but is estranged from her brother, Andrea, and her 12-year-old niece, Giovanna, who narrates the story. While Giovanna and her parents live in a middle-class section of Naples, Vittoria has remained in Pascone, the working-class neighborhood in the city's Industrial Zone where she and Andrea were raised. Throughout the novel, we get conflicting stories from Vittoria and Andrea about what led to their estrangement. A dispute about who should inherit their mother's apartment following her death was certainly the breaking point, but there had long been tension between them. Early on, it becomes clear that Andrea is frustrated that his sister did not respond to the poverty of their childhood in the same way he did: by leaving Pascone behind with no qualms or doubts and embracing the tastes and habits of the Italian bourgeoisie. But what takes longer to be revealed is that Vittoria is perhaps no better, that her working-class pride may

*Jennifer Wilson is a contributing writer for The Nation. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, The New Republic, The New Yorker, and elsewhere.*



### The Lying Life of Adults

By Elena Ferrante  
Translated by Ann Goldstein  
Europa Editions  
336 pp. \$26

not be as sturdy as she wants her young, wide-eyed niece to think.

Extramarital affairs abound, and it is tempting at first to think that the lies of the novel's title are those relating to romantic betrayal. But we soon realize that the lies that dominate the story are the ones people tell—often to themselves—about how they relate to class. As the working-class characters toggle back and forth between feeling proud and ashamed of their background, and as the ones with means rush to identify themselves with the working class, Ferrante disentangles class from class identity, showing how the latter is far more subject to lies and self-deception and constitutes a slipperier, more unstable and contradictory form of experience. At a time when class is often framed as a common denominator with the greatest potential to unify people across different identities, *The Lying Life of Adults* is a bracing reminder of the complexity of class and of the variegated ways in which human beings process what they lack and decide to fill that void.

**G**iovanna and her parents' middle-class life in the upper hills of Naples is quiet and orderly. Her father teaches history and philosophy at one of the city's most prestigious high schools and has earned a reputation as

an intellectual. He debates Marxist philosophy with his friends over dinner, while his wife, who teaches Latin and Greek, proof-reads romance novels for extra money. Everything is going according to plan—that is, until the news breaks that Giovanna, till now a model student, is getting poor marks, especially in mathematics. Her parents discuss the emergency in their kitchen, with her mother suggesting that it's just the usual disruptions of early adolescence. In frustration, her father blurts out that "adolescence has nothing to do with it; she's getting the face of Vittoria."

Giovanna is thrown into a crisis after hearing this, explaining, "In my house the name Vittoria was like the name of a monstrous being who taints and infects anyone who touches her." Fearing that her father finds her ugly, she resolves to find her aunt and see this wretched face for herself. Over time, it becomes clear that Andrea's outburst had little to do with appearances, Vittoria's or otherwise. Giovanna's report card stirred his deepest fear, namely that despite his best efforts, he has not successfully escaped his humble origins, that the taint of poverty and social dysfunction lives on genetically in his only child.

It proves to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Giovanna's yearning to see Vittoria results in numerous visits to her house; she becomes transfixed by her aunt and the people she meets in the dirty and mysterious Industrial Zone, including the older boys she will later experiment with sexually. Over the course of the novel, she comes to crave the debasement she thinks this life imprints on her: "A very violent need for degradation was growing inside me—a fearless degradation, a yearning to feel heroically vile."

**T**he narrative geography of *The Lying Life of Adults* feels uncannily inspired by the Latin and Greek texts that Giovanna's mother teaches in school. When her father finally relents and allows her to visit Vittoria, he warns her to fill her ears with wax, "like Odysseus." However, in the geography of Naples that the book presents, we get something more akin to Dante's *Inferno*, with Giovanna descending from her parents' home high up on Via San Giacomo dei Capri to Vittoria's apartment in the Industrial Zone, down near the water. "The space where my father's relatives lived," Giovanna explains, "was

## Ephemera

Each morning I sit in silence, time slides, changes  
in my heart, a moss covered cavern where its fire  
wakes me to a camaraderie of light, my wife waking

upstairs to walk to her window to pray, to gaze  
outward at the pasture where Wappinger people eyed  
white men making laws to own people and the land.

Art rules this old house, its rough rafters set in earth  
as the colony became a state, and Poughkeepsie forgot  
its own wonder, a gathering of reeds on banks of a river

Hudson believed would take him to China, his breath  
unnoticed these days by the hummingbirds that visit  
our door, sounds of their wings like my fingers tapping

my mother's empty Tupperware bowl, with cake batter  
a thin film she let me lick only when I was good, the taste  
something I let leave as I sit, waiting to be aware, woke

as some say. I imagine the sun, its fire, its electricity,  
waiting for us when we have lived all we can live, hoped  
all we can hope, some of us snatched away by the virus,

corona wrath of a world disturbed. Surprised as we  
are by nature's decisions, we refuse to surrender,  
to let go of what kills us when we try to control all

of what we cannot see. Our house is now inside me.  
It is me, I am it, my bowels and spine its forgotten  
birth, my thinning skeleton now its heavy rafters,

my emptiness its emptiness, my fullness its fullness,  
or ideas of the breath, our two minds held still by  
the fastening of it all, hook and joint, sinew and bone.

AFAA M. WEAVER

undefined, nameless. I knew only one thing  
for certain; to visit them you had to go  
down, and down, keep going down, into the  
depths of the depths of Naples.”

Once in the Industrial Zone, Giovanna  
finds herself in a polluted section of the  
city marked by “cemeteries, wastelands,  
fierce dogs, gas flares, [and] skeletons  
of abandoned buildings.” But when she  
knocks on Vittoria's door, she is greeted  
by a woman who looks nothing like the  
monster her parents sketched. In fact, her  
father was correct to invoke the Sirens, as  
“Vittoria seemed to me to have a beauty  
so unbearable that to consider her ugly  
became a necessity.”

Vittoria, who works as a maid and  
dropped out of school in the fifth grade,  
electrifies her niece. She is mercurial, pas-  
sionate, and talks to Giovanna like an  
adult. She tells her about her passionate  
affair long ago with a married man named  
Enzo. “Tell your father,” she coaches  
Giovanna, “Vittoria said that if I don't  
fuck the way she fucked with Enzo, it's  
pointless for me to live.”

When Giovanna goes home after their  
first encounter, she struggles to contain her  
excitement. She knows her parents dislike  
Vittoria and, wishing to please them, insists  
that she found her aunt rude and unre-  
fined. Her parents are initially satisfied,  
but secretly Giovanna has made plans to  
see Vittoria again. The lie exhilarates her,  
as does the feeling of being estranged from  
her parents by this secret friendship with  
their enemy. “I was euphoric,” she tells  
us, “as if the possibility of evil—what he  
and my mother in their couple's language  
claimed to call Vittoria—gave me an unex-  
pected exuberance.”

The reason for the estrangement be-  
tween Vittoria and Andrea is contested  
by them both. Vittoria insists that it  
occurred following the death of their  
mother and disagreements about what  
to do with her home. She tells Giovanna  
that everyone agreed it should go to her,  
as she had no money, but that Andrea  
wanted them all to sell it and divide the  
proceeds equally. It is part of Vittoria's  
theory that her brother, though he might  
cloak himself in high-minded rhetoric  
about literature, philosophy, and Marx-  
ism, is self-interested at heart. He is  
“attached to money, attached to things,”  
she tells her niece, adding, “I am not like  
your father.”

For their part, Giovanna's parents in-  
sist that Vittoria is merely envious. “She

refused to accept your father's success," her mother tells her. "Success in life. How hard he worked at school and university. His intelligence. What he has constructed. His degree. His job, our marriage, the things he studies, the respect that surrounds him." But while Giovanna entertains the possibility that her parents could be telling her the truth, she's having too much fun in Vittoria's world to let it stop her—particularly once she meets Corrado, a young man who seems ready to satisfy her need to be degraded "without a fuss."

Sex becomes a way for Giovanna to detach herself from Angela and Ida, the daughters of her father's wealthier intellectual friends, Mariano and Costanza. When Angela learns that Giovanna has failed her exams, the girls have a tense exchange. Giovanna brags that she "talked to boys about sex in the bad words of dialect." But when Angela merely registers disgust, Giovanna lashes out: "Only bitches like you study like parrots, get promoted and are respected by their boyfriends. I don't study. I get flunked and I'm a whore." Here, Ferrante begins to reveal that Giovanna's view of the working class is not all that different from her father's. She uses the friends she makes in the Industrial Zone as markers of authenticity and maturity that she can wield against the friends in her own social class, and in the process shows that she too stereotypes the poor as undisciplined, unintelligent, and promiscuous.

She is not, however, completely lost. There are moments when her skepticism toward her father's quest for middle-class status just feels like the wrong answer to the right question. For instance, when Giovanna's mother, seeing the changes in her daughter, tries to intervene, she insists that Vittoria only "wants to use you to prove that your father and I are all appearance, that while we have risen a little, you will plummet, and everything will even out." But would it be so bad, Giovanna's continued diversions seem to suggest, if everything did even out? Throughout the novel, Giovanna feels so close and yet so far from understanding that the way to rebel against her father is not to pretend to be poor but rather to want a world in which no one is.

**W**

Whatever sense of moral superiority Giovanna attaches to her proximity to working-class Pascone begins to unravel halfway through the book with the arrival of Roberto. He's from the Industrial Zone, but he also attends university in Milan, where he has built a reputation as a promising public intellectual. He frequently visits his old neighborhood to see his fiancée, Giuliana, the daughter of Vittoria's former lover Enzo. Everyone in Pascone regards Roberto as the neighborhood's favorite son.

Though he never says anything particularly insightful or profound, the fact that he has made it out renders him in some vague way "a particularly luminous fragment of that bleak background."

As she grows closer to her friends in Pascone, Giovanna finds that some

of them start behaving uncannily like her father: aspirational, status-obsessed, and desperate to attach themselves to a young man who is going places. Even Vittoria is anxious to show off to Roberto her middle-class niece who reads novels; class seems more amorphous in his presence. When Andrea learns that Giovanna has met Roberto (whose name he recognizes from his articles), he is shocked to learn that they met in Pascone—"as if," she notes, "in the space of a few sentences, geography had become muddled, and he had trouble keeping together Milan, the Vomero, Pascone, the house where he was born."

Roberto exposes how uneasy everyone is with their status and their assumptions about class. Yet he proves to have a complicated relationship with class himself. His engagement to Giuliana is itself fraught. With some embarrassment, he eventually admits to Giovanna that he is marrying Giuliana because she represents the streets of Pascone, his humble beginnings, a "debt" he has to pay, with little thought as to how this might make Giuliana feel—to be, as a wife, little more than a reminder for him of the bottom where he started.

**I**

In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, the third volume of the Neapolitan quartet, Lila has been forced to drop out of school, as happens with many of the poor children in

her neighborhood, and has found a job at a sausage factory. There, like the rest of the employees, she works long hours in unsafe conditions with the ever-present threat of sexual harassment. Her childhood friend Pasquale invites her to a meeting of local communists, with the hope of convincing her to unionize her coworkers. Lila starts attending the meetings regularly, but she feels estranged by the language used by these middle-class leftist intellectuals in their pronouncements about "capital, about exploitation, about the betrayal of social democracy, about the modalities of class struggle." When it's finally her turn to address the group, she indignantly tells them that "she knew nothing about the working class. She said she knew only the workers, men and women, in the factory where she worked, people from whom there was absolutely nothing to learn but wretchedness."

In *The Lying Life of Adults*, Ferrante seems to elaborate further on Lila's frustration with the idea of a cohesive working class that would necessarily identify itself as such a thing in the first place. There is Andrea, who wants to rid himself of the trappings of his working-class upbringing, and Vittoria, who is too proud to admit she might want the same—if not for herself, then for Giovanna. Then there is Giovanna, who treats the economically depressed Pascone like an amusement park and working-class identity as a thrilling badge of authenticity that she can put on and take off at will, rather than acknowledging it for what it is—a difficult, increasingly impossible way to exist in the world.

*The Lying Life of Adults* lives in the emotionally fraught distance between the characters' material reality and how they want the world to view them, and it offers an intimate study of the stress and agitation that comes from attempting to balance the two. Toward the end of the novel, Giuliana reveals to Giovanna that Roberto never asks her to read his work: "He's sure I can't understand." Instead, he asks a wealthy girl in Milan with whom he spends a lot of time to look over everything he writes. "I have to get out of Pascone, Gianni, I have to get out of Naples," Giuliana says in tears. "I want to get married and live in Milan and in a nice house of my own, in peace." She shakes her head as she says it, because the only thing more difficult than admitting how little you have is confessing how much you want.

**The Lying Life of Adults is a bracing reminder of the variegated experiences of class.**



# The Broken System

*What comes after meritocracy?*

BY ELIZABETH ANDERSON

**L**AST SPRING, REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN OF SOUTH Carolina explained why, at a pivotal moment in the Democratic primaries, he endorsed Joe Biden for president: “Our problem, it seems to me, is too many candidates spend time trying to let people know how smart they are, rather than trying to connect to people.” Clyburn said he hates it when candidates tell voters they need to be able to send their kids to college. What about the people who want to be electricians, plumbers, barbers? The promise of debt-free college, he continued, offers nothing to the significant part of his constituency that doesn’t want to go to college.

Clyburn’s endorsement played an important role in reviving Biden’s campaign: The former vice president’s thumping victory in South Carolina was the turning point of the Democratic primaries. Clyburn’s focus

on higher education and the way it might alienate potential Democratic voters also points to a larger challenge that the party has faced since the 1980s: Despite seeking to protect working-class interests more than the Republicans, it has lost considerable segments of its working-class base. A candidate like Elizabeth Warren may advocate programs that advance working-class interests, including univer-

sal child care and pre-K and worker representation on corporate boards, but she failed to draw substantial working-class support. Much the same can be said for Warren’s more centrist colleagues, figures like Pete Buttigieg and Senator Amy Klobuchar.

Michael J. Sandel’s new book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, gives us a deeper view into some of the reasons why many ordinary workers have become suspicious of the highly educated elites who seek to represent their interests in the Democratic Party. In providing a damning critique of meritocracy, Sandel also documents how, as both an ideology and a set of practices, it has become a driving force within the party as its members have become more highly educated. He argues that, in stressing

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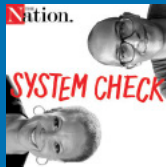
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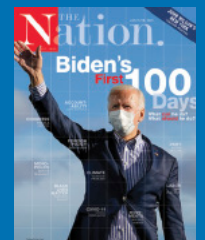
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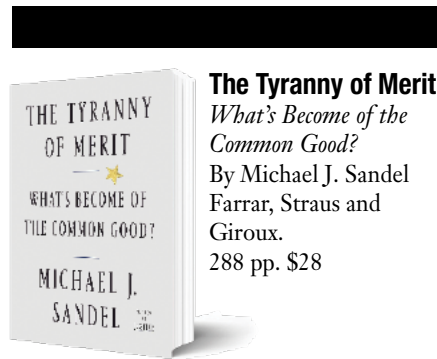
education as the primary means to get ahead in society, the party's educated elites have come to offer an increasingly narrow pathway to a decent life. In doing so, they have rationalized the rampant inequality of the past four decades and often demeaned less educated people and their contributions to society. Their meritocratic focus on technical expertise in policy-making has also excluded the less credentialed from participating in this process and displaced democratic discussion of the common good, a fundamental project in which all should be included. Even the focus of the more left-wing educated elites on distributive justice, Sandel argues, doesn't remedy the ways that meritocracy has undermined what he calls contributive justice—fair opportunities for everyone to contribute, and be recognized for contributing, to the common good.

As a critique of meritocracy and an explanation of today's populist resentment toward educated elites, *The Tyranny of Merit* is a compelling book. But Sandel's tentative suggestions for remedying the harms of meritocracy focus far too much on liberal elites, while failing to address the much more significant ways in which business elites have harmed workers. In addition, by focusing on remedies rooted in the past, his vision also neglects the increasing diversity of workers by race, gender, and immigration status. Effective policies for workers must attend to the needs of America's diverse workforce, and they can only be achieved by a politics that brings workers together and empowers them through democratic practices that extend into the workplace. This requires a 21st-century social-democratic agenda.

**S**andel began his career in Harvard's Department of Government in 1980, where he quickly became known as a leading communitarian critic of liberalism, especially as articulated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. His first book, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, was dedicated to developing this communitarian critique. In it, Sandel challenged Rawls's commitment to neutrality when it came to questions about the good life. He argued that neutrality led Rawls's theory of justice to be excessively individualistic. Distributive justice, Sandel insisted, could only be understood in collective terms and through shared conceptions of the good that are tied to citizens' identities.

Since *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel has spent much of his career developing these communitarian arguments, which have also evolved into republican ones. In works like *Democracy's Discontent*, *The Case Against Perfection*, and *What Money Can't Buy*, he has consistently stressed the centrality of a republican concept of the common good to democratic politics.

In *The Tyranny of Merit*, Sandel continues his critique of liberal individualism. But he does so now by considering the ideology of meritocracy, which conceives of life as a race in which individuals scramble over one another



**The Tyranny of Merit**

*What's Become of the Common Good?*

By Michael J. Sandel  
Farrar, Straus and  
Giroux.

288 pp. \$28

to reach higher rungs on the ladder of success by demonstrating their superior talents and work ethic. Presenting a long bill of indictment against meritocracy, Sandel demonstrates not only how the liberal promise of equality of opportunity has not been fulfilled but also how the very conception of life as a relentless competitive race unjustly denigrates the losers, produces a cynical and arrogant elite, corrupts the institutions of higher education, and replaces democracy with technocracy. Unwittingly, it thereby gives rise to a populist backlash.

Sandel recognizes that other factors besides meritocracy have undermined the working class. Globalization, technological change, and the economic policies initiated since the 1970s have reduced the prospects of many American workers without college degrees, he argues. Meritocracy has justified these shifts by claiming that they reward workers in proportion to their productive contributions to society: In the new information economy, highly educated professionals and especially those in the STEM fields contribute far more than others. As a remedy for increasing inequality, meritocracy promises broader opportunities by opening access to higher education and allowing more people to enter these fields.

Sandel shows how that promise is a lie. Inequality has skyrocketed since the '70s, while intergenerational social mobility has declined. The top tier of workers has turned itself into a self-reproducing elite, flattering itself as a natural aristocracy superior to the losers in the race to succeed. And it has recruited the institutions of higher education—especially elite colleges and universities—to perform the task of sorting, ranking, and credentialing individuals to feed the meritocratic job-allocation machine.

The results have been disastrous. By turning colleges and universities into the gatekeepers to jobs that offer dignity, security, and a decent standard of living, meritocracy has not remedied inequality; as Sandel argues, it has entrenched and justified it. He presents devastating statistics that show how selective schools do much less to promote social mobility than to consolidate privilege. The most elite schools enroll more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the bottom 50 percent. And their gatekeeping hardly stops at the admissions office. Colleges and universities erect additional hoops through which students must jump in an endless meritocratic arms race, as they compete for selection in elite extracurricular clubs, internships, academic honors, professional schools, and corporate jobs.

The job of meritocratic sorting and ranking, Sandel continues, also ultimately undermines the mission of education itself. Students feel that they must pile on credentials, grub for grades, and even cheat to succeed, leaving them with little time or energy for exploration, critical reflection, and learning for its own sake. Ruthless competition contributes to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses among college students. By the time they finally make it into the top jobs, many are burned out and cynical. Seeing themselves as having earned their success through their own hard work and neglecting the enormous socioeconomic advantages and supports they enjoyed along the way, they feel entitled to grab all they can for themselves.

In Sandel's view, meritocracy does more than drive material inequality; it creates a toxic economy of esteem. The winners in meritocratic competition feel

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entitled to take all they can, while the losers feel humiliated, continually told they deserve the fate to which elites consign them. However socially necessary their jobs may be, their contributions to the common good are disparaged by elites as uncredentialed and “low skill.” This adds insult to the injury of stagnant wages and precarity that many working-class Americans face. A system that imagines itself to be meting out to each person what he or she deserves is instead, as Sandel puts it, a “hollow political project” that pits people against one another and leads to a politics of resentment.

**T**he consequences of the meritocratic age for democracy have proved to be grim. Elites, puffed up by the conceit that their superior positions are entirely due to their own strenuous efforts, lack gratitude for the social advantages that enabled their success and have little sympathy for or solidarity with the less fortunate. Their meager conception of the common good is limited to a technocratic obsession with growth, whether of the GDP or test scores. (Barack Obama’s Race to the Top educational program illustrates this obsession.) The highest praise they can offer for public policies is to call them “smart”—implying that they, the smartest ones, should be in charge of designing and executing them. But “smart” technocratic policies are often most concerned with rigging incentives to get the “right” meritocratic results desired by elites. They abandon the democratic project of constructing a vision of the common good together and focus only on sustaining the meritocratic regime as it exists.

In any event, elites are poorly equipped to reinvigorate democracy, Sandel insists. Colleges and universities, absorbed in the sorting-and-ranking project, have abandoned civic education, while their students, caught up in the credentials race, rarely reflect on the common good and have not learned practical wisdom in the scramble to the top. Living in class-segregated neighborhoods and overwhelmingly marrying and befriending members of their own class, elites are

out of touch with the working class and ignorant of its concerns and problems. Those who pursue elected office won’t meet the latter in Congress or state legislatures either. These bodies, which once included many members without university degrees, are now almost entirely filled by the college-educated.

No wonder the non-college-educated have erupted in populist revolt. Vividly aware of the reality that hard work does not enable them to rise and resentful of condescending elite judgments, many gravitate toward populist authoritarian leaders who channel their grievances and promise to restore them to their former centrality in the nation and the culture.

To dismantle meritocracy and promote democracy, Sandel argues that we need to do two things. First, we need to reform education. To undermine the relentless sorting-and-ranking function of universities, he suggests that the most elite schools expand enrollment and admit by lottery applicants who pass a basic threshold of academic qualification. This proposal would affect only a small percentage of admissions, however, and

does nothing for those who do not aspire to college. For the latter, he recommends increasing support for vocational and technical education. He also recommends a civic education for all, not

just for the college-bound, so that everyone can better participate in democracy.

Sandel argues that alongside these changes to education must come a cultural shift: We need to honor all work that contributes to the common good. This requires a focus on contributive justice. It’s a fundamental human need to be appreciated and recognized by others in society. It’s not enough to offer monetary compensation to the unemployed for jobs lost because of global trade. The unemployed need jobs so they can contribute to society and regain the recognition owed to contributors. And they need jobs that pay well enough to support their families and communities.

Finally, Sandel argues that we must challenge the meritocratic assumption that income is a good measure of an individual’s contribution to society. The rich get much of their income from worthless, destructive, or merely ex-

tractive activities, especially in the financial sector, where fortunes are made from high-frequency trading, speculating on derivatives, and other kinds of financial engineering that don’t serve the real economy. The tax system should be revised to eliminate the favorable treatment of capital income relative to wage income and to discourage financial schemes that merely extract wealth from others or destabilize the economy.

Sandel insists that we also need to have serious discussions about what activities really do contribute to the common good, and we need to reward those activities accordingly. This discussion may deviate from liberal neutrality about conceptions of the good, but it’s needed to dislodge the morally obnoxious pretense that the market offers a neutral way to value people’s contributions. It may also help to defuse populist revolt by reviving democratic policy-making around broadly shared values rather than the neoliberal preferences of elites.

**T**hus far, almost everything Sandel argues in *The Tyranny of Merit* checks out. His two broad ideas—reforming education and honoring work—offer valuable ways to begin the effort of dismantling meritocracy. His recommendations, however, don’t always meet the challenges posed by populism or by what philosophers have come to call “the politics of recognition,” which seeks to create a society defined by the equal dignity and standing of diverse groups. By concentrating almost exclusively on educated elites, he also neglects the role of business elites in degrading workers’ dignity and economic prospects. And by proposing economic policies that recall the working-class politics of the past, which was focused on white men, he neglects the needs of workers today.

Part of the problem comes from Sandel’s identification of elites with the college-educated. By focusing on how professional-class elites flaunt their educational credentials, he overlooks how contemporary partisan politics in the United States and most rich democratic states around the world reflect a rivalry between educated elites and business elites. Thomas Piketty traces the impact of this rivalry on party politics in *Capital and Ideology*. In the postwar era, he argues, center-left parties repre-

**Effective policies for workers must attend to the increasingly diverse US workforce.**

sented the working class, while right-wing parties, dominated by businesspeople, represented the better-off. In the mid-'70s, however, center-right parties pioneered the harsh neoliberal policies that eroded the economic and social standing of the bottom half of workers in the rich democracies. Meanwhile, Piketty points out, the center-left parties failed to update their policies in defense of their working-class base and even supported many of the globalization and deregulation policies put forward by the center-right.

These combined failures helped create a partisan realignment in which the center-left parties moved from an overwhelmingly working-class base to a coalition that joined highly educated voters with groups oppressed on the basis of their race, ethnicity, caste, religion, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, or other stigmatized identities. Politics in many democracies now features a competition for power between the propertied “merchant right” business class and the highly educated, cosmopolitan class of professional, knowledge, and culture workers who defend diversity but lack a serious working-class agenda. As the socioeconomic policy differences of the two elites have narrowed, politics has shifted to cultural and identity issues. Piketty argues that the center-left’s abandonment of the working class has enabled the right to appeal to working-class members of the ethnic majority through populist appeals that activate fear and resentment of oppressed groups and hence also of the educated elites who defend them.

Sandel rightly argues that many concerns of white working-class voters in the United States should not be dismissed, even if some of them are moved to vote based on bigoted and racist appeals. His critique of meritocracy shows how they too share in the legitimate complaints that all members of the working class have with respect to their declining economic prospects and social standing. Any future social-democratic politics, he notes, will require a program that focuses not only on the redistribution of income and wealth but also on the dignity of all workers and their right to a decent and honored job. Yet in pinning the blame on highly educated elites, Sandel lets the merchant right, the chief peddlers of right-wing populism, off the hook. Although

the meritocratic center-left is complicit in working-class decline, the pivotal practices behind it—union-busting, outsourcing, and wage theft; the privatization of public services; the construction of monopsony in labor markets; the rise of asset-stripping private equity; skyrocketing executive compensation; the replacement of regular employees with temporary workers, independent contractors, and precarious gig workers; the end of corporate pensions and promotion ladders; and so on—have been aggressively pursued by business elites. Sandel offers no counter to such policies, which have cast many highly educated workers, including academics, journalists, and lawyers, into the ranks of the precariat.

**S**andel passes by most of these developments in silence. While his account makes right-wing populist revolt against liberal elites understandable, it also obscures how business elites turned working-class jobs into shit jobs—poorly paid, insecure, dead-end, and despised. He thereby reinforces the same patterns of attention preferred by the merchant right, which fans the flames of resentment against the highly educated to divert our attention away from how it is robbing workers blind.

Because Sandel ignores most of the merchant-right policies that undermine working-class prospects, his discussion of ideas for restoring dignity to work is limited, tentative, and based on false assumptions. He mentions, without endorsing, the recommendations of Oren Cass, a conservative policy wonk, who calls for wage subsidies, rollbacks of environmental regulations, and immigration and trade restrictions that would bring back something close to the 20th century’s family wage. Yet there is little evidence that immigration reduces working-class wages, and in an era of catastrophic climate change, destroying the environment is hardly a viable way to restore decent working-class jobs. More generally, policies that were originally designed for heterosexual white working-class men can’t serve the working class as it is constituted today. Sandel doesn’t consider important core issues

faced by many contemporary workers, such as the feminization of poverty, the lack of paid family leave and affordable dependent care, and our failure to honor dependent-care labor as an essential contribution to the common good—not

only when it is wage labor but also as unpaid family labor. He never mentions the gross exploitation of immigrant workers or the precarity of those who are (or whose families

include) undocumented immigrants. He doesn’t consider how the residential hypersegregation of Black workers causes unemployment or how mass incarceration is used to create a substantial class of unpaid prison laborers exploited by major corporations.

As Sandel rightly stresses, a politics that detaches access to material goods from claims to the dignity and honor of work fails to deliver the kinds of recognition that workers deserve. But to deliver that, it isn’t enough to repudiate the condescension of meritocratic liberals or to take higher education out of the meritocratic sorting-and-ranking game. The whole battery of merchant-right strategies for disempowering workers must be dismantled as well. Wage subsidies that partially compensate for these strategies while leaving them intact won’t deliver the recognition workers need.

There is a close connection between respect and power. For workers to regain respect, they need the power to exact it from their employers. This requires strengthening and expanding labor unions, as Bernie Sanders has proposed, and empowering workers to elect board members at top corporations, as Elizabeth Warren has urged. But it also means directing more of our attention not only to meritocracy but to capitalism itself. Without an empowered working class, democratic institutions will remain in the grip of disdainful elites—not just the highly educated elites whom Sandel criticizes, but also the wealthy business elites who promote populist authoritarian politics to escape accountability for the damage their actions inflict on everyone else. To move forward, we need to build on the ideas of Sanders, Warren, and younger Democrats and radicals to reconstruct social democracy for the 21st century. **N**

**There is a close connection between respect and power.**





# A Poisonous Legacy

*New York City and the persistence of the Middle Passage*

BY GERALD HORNE

**I**N THE MIDDLE OF 1856, THE SOON-TO-BE-CELEBRATED poet Walt Whitman visited an impounded slave ship in Brooklyn. The taking of the ship was an unusual occurrence, as it was one of the few illegal slavers seized by an otherwise lethargic Washington, D.C., and Whitman wanted to give his readers a tour of the vessel, which had been designed to add even more enslaved laborers to the millions already ensnared in this system of iniquity, including of its hold, where those victimized were to be “laid together spoon-fashion.”

Whitman’s keen journalistic interest was a response to the feverish political climate in his homeland, featuring ever more overwrought cries demanding the relegalization and reopening of the Atlantic slave trade. Officially, this branch of flesh peddling had been rendered illegal by Britain in 1807 and by the United

States in 1808, but it had continued nonetheless, with boatloads of kidnapped Africans being transported to the Americas, especially Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. It was likely that some of Whitman’s readers in New York City—the citadel of this illicit commerce—would have taken a decided interest in his grim reportage.

John Harris’s *The Last Slave Ships* of-

fers a more comprehensive portrait of the illegal slave trade in the Atlantic, starting with the last slave ships to dock in New York Harbor. Mining the historical archives in Spain, Portugal, Cuba, and the United States, Harris demonstrates how, even as slavery was being abolished in the Northern states, it continued to flourish, since the slave system was not confined simply to below the Mason-Dixon Line. The financing of the slave trade’s illegitimate commerce was sited heavily in Manhattan: The ships passed through the waterways of the city’s harbor, and the denizens of Gotham also enjoyed the profits of this odious system, even as many of them publicly denounced it. After all, slave ships required crews, not to mention the need to grease the palms of corrupt officials at the harbor and elsewhere with attractive bribes. In sum, the wealth produced by slave labor built not only a region but a nation. Like Charleston, S.C., and Galveston, Tex., New York City benefited from the trade in human souls—which, in a sense, continues to undergird Wall Street.

Much of *The Last Slave Ships* concerns itself with the years immediately preceding the crushing of this ugly business as a consequence of the Civil War, and the book chronicles how the construction of swift ships was financed in New York, how the audacious smuggling persisted as a result, and how the breathtaking inhumanity that this smuggling created continues to bedevil this country even though it ended many decades ago.

Indeed, it does not require acrobatically inclined inferences to conclude that the vessel Whitman visited in the Brooklyn Navy Yard symbolized far more than the attempted impounding of slavery itself, which within five years was to ignite a bloody war. It also represented a moral economy that eroded the most basic human empathy. One might add that the story of how a slave ship wound up in New York waters also sheds light on how a would-be Manhattan Mussolini received 74 million votes in the presidential election of 2020.

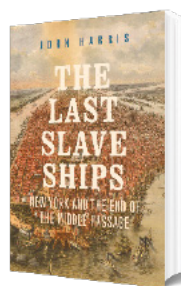
**A**fter the triumph of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, which saw the successful overthrow of slavery by the enslaved themselves, the British Empire sensed the imminent danger both to its

investments and to the lives of British settlers in the Caribbean, especially those living in the cash cows of Jamaica and Barbados, so it chose to curtail the country's role in the African slave trade. In 1807, the House of Commons passed the Slave Trade Act, which made illegal the participation of British ships and citizens and ultimately helped to extirpate this pestilence more generally. By 1808, London's spawn on the west bank of the Atlantic had moved similarly—at least on the surface—with the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which outlawed US involvement in the non-domestic slave trade. Had these laws been rigorously enforced, they would have spelled the beginning of the end of the Atlantic slave trade.

But the monarchy and the newly independent republic once ruled by it responded to these acts differently. The Royal Navy became the cop on the beat chasing down scofflaws. Meanwhile, many of the scofflaws it was chasing down were in US-built-and-flagged vessels that were maintained, at times, by crews from the purported revolutionary republic. Thus, in the first half of the 19th century, two parallel developments played a role in the evolving drama: British ships hunted down human traffickers, while US ships did their best to evade the long arm of the law. Even though the Atlantic slave trade had been officially outlawed in the United States, it persisted despite this fact, which meant that millions of captives still departed Africa for a hellish enslavement in the Americas. Indeed, Harris writes, “almost four million captives left African shores between the beginning of the century and the closure of the traffic in the 1860s, around a third of all captives who ever crossed the Atlantic.”

A ray of sunshine in this cumulus of gloom came in the mid-19th century. At least by some accounts, the bulk of this horrendous merchandising of human souls reached a zenith in the 1840s in Brazil, the largest market of all, and then began to slow. But even following a military defeat of the enslavers in the United States in 1865, the slave trade limped along in Brazil and Cuba until the 1880s. As Harris shows, much of this bondage survived as a result of financial and diplomatic support from the nation that had proclaimed itself a “shining city upon a hill” and, in particular, from its shiniest city: New York.

**T**he obscenely profitable slave ships were financed in New York City, and as Whitman discovered, the ships departed from there, too. Moreover, when New Yorkers sipped their morning coffee or sweetened their morning tea, it was often coffee that had been produced by slave labor in Brazil and sugar produced by slave labor in Cuba. A number of New York's elected representatives may have been officially opposed to the slave trade, but they nonetheless rep-



**The Last Slave Ships**  
*New York and the End of the Middle Passage*  
By John Harris  
Yale University Press.  
300 pp. \$30

resented a city and a state that profited from it immensely.

As Harris writes, during the Atlantic slave trade's later stages, slave ships embarked from many points along the Eastern Seaboard, but New York City accounted for two out of every three departures. Investors in the illegal trade were willing to assume the risk, since, during this era, the average return on investment was an eye-watering 91 percent. Just as later generations of Wall Street wizards devised collateralized debt obligations and other devious instruments designed to maximize profit, their predecessors acted in a manner that anticipated today's financial engineering. Revealingly, Lehman Brothers, the Wall Street firm whose 2008 bankruptcy was said to have triggered a financial crisis that required massive bailouts and almost brought capitalism to its knees, began by capitalizing lucratively on the production of cotton picked by enslaved labor in Alabama.

Insurance companies also wallowed in the filthy lucre of this odious business. Then as now, the financing and insuring taking place in New York proved to be a transnational business. This unclean interchange may have originated in Gotham, but it involved and benefited investors in Western Europe (especially Portugal and Spain) and in Cuba and Bra-

zil. Also implicated were the ship-building industries of Maine and Maryland, often kept afloat by Manhattan investors, along with many other New Yorkers who lived in a city whose economy was still buoyed by slavery.



While certain New Yorkers were diabolically investing in the illegal slave trade, across the ocean in London, the British government began to invest in spies in order to keep track of it, devising publications to chart the movements of slave ships and subsidizing the Royal Navy, which was authorized to halt their devilry.

The overly optimistic observer might have imagined that the United States would move in a similar direction. Yet while London proved to be an often fierce watchdog, Washington proved to be a toothless terrier, protestations about an antislavery Constitution notwithstanding. From 1851 to 1860, 159 individuals were prosecuted under US slave trade laws in the republic; of these, 99 were acquitted, encountered a deadlocked jury, or were otherwise ordered released. Twelve were tried and convicted but endured only a slap on the wrist, and nine managed to escape custody somehow. The outcomes for the remainder are unclear, though it is fair to assume that they too eluded punishment. Prosecutors failed to file charges against 21 others, because of the distinct possibility they would not be convicted.

The Africa Squadron of the United States, ostensibly intended to quash this illicit trading at the source, was hardly robust. Based in Cape Verde, it was stationed far from the Congo-Angola region used by enslavers—to say nothing of similarly hounded Mozambique, on the opposite side of the sprawling continent. The Africa Squadron's placement was akin to basing the Los Angeles Police Department's anti-bank-robbery squad in Racine, Wis. The US Navy was incompetent, typically dispatching fewer than five vessels to Africa, while London posted about 30. Predictably, from 1843 to 1858, the US Navy captured 20 slavers, while during the same period the Royal Navy, based more sensibly in Luanda, Angola,

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captured over 500. Perhaps worse, the United States sought vigorously to bar the Royal Navy from searching suspected slave ships bearing the Stars and Stripes.

**T**he dictates of monograph writing—hard-pressed publishers seeking to cut costs by shrinking page counts, assisted by hawkish peer reviewers eager to insist that authors remain in their narrow lane—likely helps to explain why Harris’s otherwise informative book does not engage with the strategic reasons for this geopolitical fiasco. But the United States’ slothfulness in responding to such rampant illegality did serve to deliver an enormous gift to its monarchical foe in the form of those African Americans willing to take their side.

The eminent Frederick Douglass was among the legions who expressed a love for Britain at a time when the two powers were at each other’s throats. But Douglass was hardly the first African American to do so: Many of the republic’s enslaved people—the greater number of them by far—backed the redcoats during the 1776 war for this very reason, opposing the ultimately victorious rebels. During the War of 1812 between the United States and Britain, enslaved people also defected en masse to the Union Jack, including during the sacking of Washington in August 1814, when enslaved Africans fled on retreating British vessels to Trinidad and Tobago, where they received land grants and where their descendants continue to live.

Perhaps the Yankees realized that this pro-London stance was unlikely to last forever and comforted themselves nervously with the thought. Yet there was doubtless fear when Douglass announced that “in the event of a British army landing in the States and offering liberty to the slaves, [the enslaved] would rally round the British at the first tap of the drum.”

In sum, the allegiances of the enslaved were situational. After all, those with longer memories may have recalled the Stono Revolt in colonial South Carolina in 1739, when the enslaved were assisted by Spanish Florida in the bloodiest slave revolt of the colonial era in British North America. Others may have recalled the time in the late 16th century when it was Spain’s turn to worry, as the maritime John Brown—Jacques Sorie,

a French corsair—terrorized Madrid’s settlements from South America to the Florida Straits by offering freedom to the enslaved. Or that just before the US takeover in Florida 200 years ago, the British sponsored the well-armed Negro Fort, staffed by Africans and their Indigenous comrades, which was the beginning of several decades-long wars, some of the bloodiest fought by the US military. Unsurprisingly, as the Stars and Stripes were unfurled on the peninsula, a steady stream of ships overflowing with Africans headed south to Cuba, unwilling to wager that the allegedly antislavery US Constitution would—eventually—reveal itself.

Washington, D.C., had good reason to believe that London was determined to harass its former colony and use the enslaved as a bludgeon with which to accomplish this ambition, which is often what London did. In 1858, it placed a “man of color,” Sir James Douglas, as its chief executive in British Columbia, inducing many Africans—enslaved and otherwise—to flee there and to other sites along the elongated border with Canada just as Washington sought to claim the vast Oregon Territory.

Hastening the scurrying of Texas into the Union was the fear that Britain was determined to create yet another Haiti in the Lone Star State, thus jeopardizing neighboring Louisiana and Arkansas and the slave-holding South as a whole. Circling the wagons around fellow republicans was thought by the US government to be a way to guarantee this fate would not befall what became a bulwark of secession. It also helped convince the otherwise audacious Texans that the better part of wisdom was in joining the like-minded Yankees and liquidating their own imperiled independence.

The British were hardly a pristine ally of the oppressed. At the same time that the officialdom in Whitehall was denouncing republican pretensions in the United States with full-throated fieriness, redcoats were repressing South Asians as a result of the Sepoy Revolt in 1857. But wrestling with this contradiction was hardly unique to the enslaved and their allies. Strategic flexibility is almost always

an unavoidable reality when confronting humanity’s forms of barbarism.

**W**hile Harris occasionally considers this strategic flexibility and the countless heroic African Americans who were largely responsible for sabotaging the republic’s—and New York City’s—dirty role in sustaining this bondage, he could have written more about African American resistance, especially in Manhattan itself. Consider, for example, the heroic David Ruggles, who was a one-man battering ram against actual and potential enslavers. Ruggles, a mariner—a labor force that often included the most militant of proletarians—applied the organizing acumen he learned at sea to the abolitionist movement, which in turn embodied the truism that the working class as a whole could not be liberated if African Americans in the republic were branded with the indelible badge of inferiority. Unsurprisingly, the mass struggle for an eight-hour workday, and the liftoff of unions more generally, only occurred after the abolition of slavery.

Nevertheless, Harris does illuminate some of the dilemmas that today face those seeking to resist the poisonous legacy of slavery. Though dimly understood, even by those who consider themselves class warriors, class struggle—often emblazoned in a

blindingly fierce anti-racism—has characterized the travails of enslaved Africans in North America from the start of their resistance and was given even fiercer determination as a result of the illegal slave trade. Perhaps the harshest, most cruelly antagonistic and draconian of class relationships is that between the enslaved and the slaveholder. As such, the class struggle of the enslaved has shaped the contours of this land, defining not only resistance to slavery but, ultimately, the political configuration that continues to this very day.

When, in the 1520s, the Spanish dispatched a complement of the enslaved from their perch in Santo Domingo to the region stretching north from Florida, the enslaved had other plans: Recognizing their com-

**There is no more dramatic example of class struggle than the formerly enslaved taking up arms to end slavery.**

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YOUNGE —Hosted by **Jon Wiener****

mon class interests with local Native groups, they revolted with their Indigenous comrades and chased the would-be settlers back to the Caribbean. When, by 1607, the English had established a foothold in the land they called Virginia, the Spanish due south wanted to intervene but were too busy fighting the Africans and their Indigenous allies once again in Florida. In short, class struggle by the enslaved helps to explain why today we are communicating in English.

Alternatively, settler colonialism—a phrase curiously missing from the vocabularies of many of those who consider themselves radical in the United States—was also a product of class collaboration from its inception. At the behest of the English crown, small businessmen, tailors, goldsmiths, teachers, and others arrived in the land to be known as North Carolina in the 1580s. Sponsoring those who arrived in 1607 were grandees, including leaders of the East India Company—London’s vector of exploitation in South Asia—and various pillagers of West Africa.

This class collaboration between the grandees and the hoi polloi reached its ultimate expression during the Civil War, when nonslaveholders were the main fighting force for the so-called Confederate States of America, which sought to destroy the republic in order to maintain slavery. The shedding of their blood for enslavers was not altogether an expression of misplaced class interest, since many of the common soldiers sought to become enslavers or thought that maintaining their castelike privilege was something worth defending. Yet a victory would have meant a further downward pressure on wages and working conditions driven by slavery. This dastardly display illustrates that class collaboration can often take the form of the highest stage of white supremacy, and vice versa. Correspondingly, no more dramatic example of class struggle can be found than that of tens of thousands of formerly enslaved people fighting with arms in hand in order to terminate slavery and remain “forever free.”

Similarly, in New York City, as Harris suggests, during the heyday of the illicit slave trade, the perpetrators relied heavily not only on older mercantile interests but also on working-class Euro-Americans, as evidenced by the racist “draft riots” of 1863, when a deadly revolt unfolded, ostensibly against conscription, that

amounted to a bloody anti-Black pogrom.

Today, this supposed odd coupling of economic royalists and commoners manifests itself in the remaining strongholds of conservatism in the city’s five boroughs—from the Upper East Side of Manhattan to the mostly red Staten Island. Unsurprisingly, campaign donations and foot soldiers for Trumpism have emerged from these two areas. Equally unsurprisingly, the vanguard of the US electorate—descendants of the enslaved—emerges from those marinated in class struggle, who vote against the right wing at rates as high as 9 to 1. Meanwhile, the working class is split, as some persist in believing that the clock of history can be put into reverse and that a system that once expropriated the Indigenous of their land, frequently on behalf of less affluent Euro-Americans, can be restored.

**N**ot long after the guns of war roared at Fort Sumter, Nathaniel Gordon of Maine was the first (and only) slave trader executed pursuant to US law, and with the Civil War on, the Union finally moved to match London with a treaty facilitating a further crackdown on this ugly business, especially in New York, with Secretary of State (and former New York governor) William Seward sagely informing Abraham Lincoln that this was “the most important act of your life and of mine.”

Neither the Emancipation Proclamation nor the successful prosecution of the Civil War necessarily vitiates this extraordinary claim, and Harris’s smoothly written, well-researched book provides further credence for the proposition, illuminating an often forgotten yet crucially important chapter in US history in which the republic continued to support and promote the Atlantic slave trade after it had been declared illegal. But another important theme in this history also emerges from his book: that a divided working class, fractured along the lines of those involved in class struggle and those in class collaboration, can hardly prosper, just as a nation can hardly exist half slave and half free, as Lincoln once argued. Harris’s timely tome helps clarify why this is so and helps remind us why, in today’s republic, uplifting organized labor—especially those in the ranks thought to bear the badges and indicia of inferiority—remains a pressing priority. **N**



# Letters

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## The Meaning of Masks

As a disabled reader of *The Nation*, I read Gwen Florio's portrait of Kalispell, Mont., with mounting dismay ["Montana, Unmasked," Jan. 25/ Feb. 1]. I'm a writer with cerebral palsy who is intimately familiar with the frustrations that come with the loss of control over my body. However, I would like to tell the antimask scofflaws that just because you're not in total control doesn't mean you are being actively oppressed. Control must be nearly as deadly an illusion as the power of whiteness.

ERIKA D. JAHNEKE  
PHOENIX

## Post Officers?

☛ In regard to "Saving the Mail" by Jake Bittle [Jan. 25/ Feb. 1], the US Postal Service is not truly an independent organization, although in many ways it tries to act like one. I believe it should be run like the military, with a congressionally approved budget.

JAMES METHVIN

## Rightward Tilt

☛ David Klion's excellent review of Anne Applebaum's *Twilight of Democracy* ["Ex-Friends," Jan. 25/Feb. 1] brings out a lot of needed points that the mainstream reviews of the book have largely ignored. As a commentator on current American politics, Applebaum is a good student of Stalin's Russia. But maybe she should come back home and get more of a firsthand view of what we're really up against in 2021. (It is not about Stalin or Lenin.)

ANDY MOURSUND

## The Days Ahead

Re "Biden's First 100 Days" [Jan. 11/18]: I am surprised the issue of immigration was not addressed in the list of 10 critical issues for Joe Biden's first 100 days in office. Recall that the Biden administration put forth legislation on immigration during his first week on the job, and immigration directly affects many if not all of the other 10 topics, from Covid-19 and climate to Black Lives Matter and labor. If journalists place the issue on the back burner, so will the Biden administration.

DAVID HERNÁNDEZ  
Associate Professor of *Latino Studies*  
Mount Holyoke College  
SOUTH HADLEY, MASS.

☛ "Biden's First 100 Days: Debt" by Astra Taylor [Jan. 11/18] was a great article, but forgiveness of debt is a taxable event. If the government forgives, say, \$50,000 of my student debt, I may have to come up with some \$10,000 to \$15,000 in taxes. MAURICE BOUCHARD

## Voters Strike Back

In the final installment of his column ["Focus on the Fundamentals," Jan. 11/18], Eric Alterman referred to the three most important problems we face, which are really all the same: Voters rarely matter much. Until, that is, they have faith in making a difference. We were fortunate in the run-off elections for Georgia's two Senate seats that many voters decided their votes just might count, for a change. Thank you, Eric Alterman. You have served us well!

MELVIN MACKEY  
VASHON, WASH.

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# Q&A

## Elizabeth Kolbert

To say that the earth is in crisis is an understatement. “Atmospheric warming, ocean warming, ocean acidification, sea-level rise, deglaciation, desertification, eutrophication—these are just some of the by-products of our species’s success,”

Elizabeth Kolbert warns readers in her new book, *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future*. Kolbert has been studying the consequences of humankind’s impact on the planet for decades as a contributor to *The New Yorker* and as the author of 2015’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Sixth Extinction*. Now she examines an emerging pattern that she attributes to “the recursive logic of the Anthropocene”: human interventions that attempt to correct past interventions in the environment. “The issue, at this point, is not whether we’re going to alter nature,” Kolbert writes, “but to what end?” —Naomi Elias

**NE: The book visits sites in Iceland, Australia, New Orleans, and the deserts of California and Nevada. What drew you to the projects you write about?**

**EK:** The first project that got me started down this whole path was the “super coral” project, which is currently in Hawaii and partly in Australia. As the oceans warm, corals are having a lot of trouble surviving. We get these coral-bleaching events that I’m sure people have heard about. Some scientists were looking at how we can save coral reefs, and the idea they came up with was that we need to coax along evolution so that these creatures can survive climate change. That struck me as a really interesting project and got me thinking about this question of “Can we intervene to redress our own interventions?”

**NE: Are we digging ourselves out of a hole or just digging a deeper one?**

**EK:** You know, you have identified the question at the center of the book. That is a question that I don’t claim to answer. I’m not a prophet. In many cases, these solutions are working to a certain extent. New Orleans would not exist without massive human intervention to solve the problems of water. In New Orleans—a city that’s significantly below sea level—it turns out you need flooding to keep the land from subsiding even further, because that’s actually what built the land: the flooding that dropped a lot of sediment across the Mississippi Delta over many millennia. Are you getting into a trap when you pile these interventions on top of each other? Do you have alternatives? These are the big questions.

**NE: I’d like to talk about the popular phrase for the geological epoch we’re living in, “the Anthropocene.” What does it mean for how we think about our relationship to the earth?**

**EK:** We first decentered humans, right? It wasn’t that the sun revolved around the earth; it was that the earth revolved around the sun. There’s a lot of these discoveries that have proved people are not the center of the universe—but then we get to the present moment, where we have to acknowledge that we are becoming the dominant force in many very essential ways. This term, the Anthropocene, is kind of a shorthand for all the ways that humans are affecting the earth on what is sometimes called a geological scale. We are changing the carbon cycle very dramatically, we’re changing the nitrogen cycle, we’re acidifying the ocean. We’ve even gotten to the point where we regularly cause earthquakes. We need to rise to that challenge of thinking about what we want the world to look like now that we are such a dominant force.

**NE: Many of the things you discuss in your book were set in motion long before the 2016 election, but it’s hard to overstate what a setback the past four years have been for the climate. What are your thoughts on your job under the Biden administration?**

**EK:** What Trump did was egregious. It was an attempt to set us off on the wrong trajectory. Now a lot of regulations will have to be rewritten; it’s going to occupy the [Environmental Protection Agency] for years. But there are forces at work, and fortunately some of those continue to go in the right direction, like the tremendous decrease in the prices of wind and solar power, despite Trump’s efforts to undermine renewable power. What I’m thinking about are—I don’t want to call them bigger questions, but they’re the questions of our human impact on the planet, which are not going to change because Biden suddenly rejoined the Paris Agreement, unfortunately. **N**



**“We have to acknowledge that we are becoming the dominant force.”**

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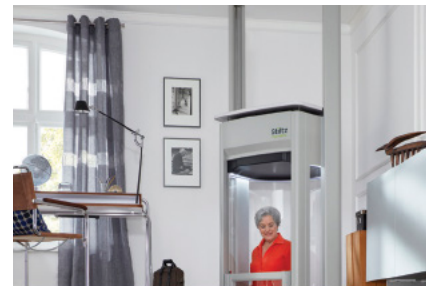


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