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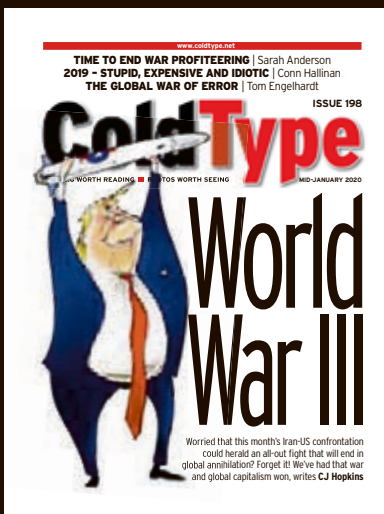
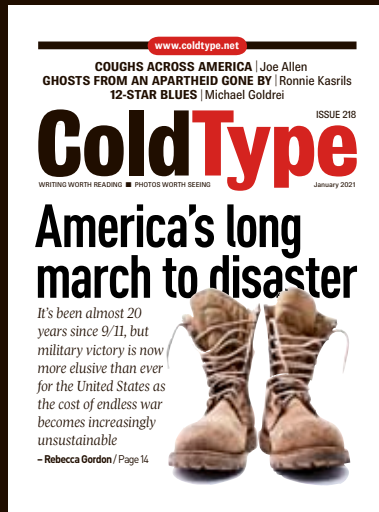
August 2021

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE WANTS YOU (AND YOUR JOB)

**We'd better start
to control machines
before they learn
how to control us**

– JOHN FEFFER / PAGE 13





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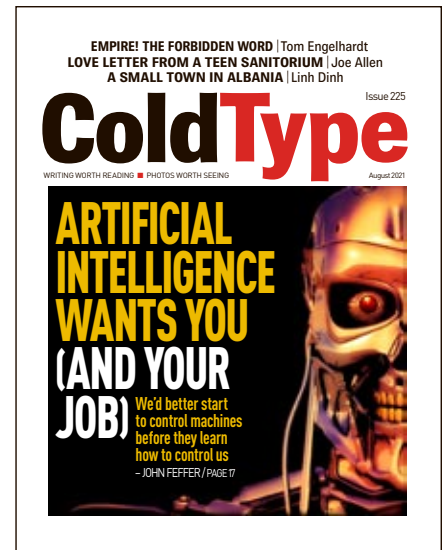
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NIREN TOLSI

Looting, death and fear return to the streets of South Africa

Recent violence and looting – with the potential for an orchestrated race war – evoke haunting memories of a bitter and bloody history in South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal province

On the night of January 13, 1949, my father slept in the sugar-cane fields in Doringkop, on South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal North Coast, along with the women and children in his family. He was eight years old.

News had reached the tiny farming hamlet that there had been rioting earlier that day in Durban’s Grey Street area. Shops owned by people of South Asian descent had been looted. The violence had started after an altercation between a man of South Asian descent and a youngster of Zulu heritage at the Victoria Street Market.

It was the spark that would lead to another two days and nights of wanton destruction of homes and buildings during an “anti-Indian” pogrom defined by murders, rapes and wounds of race and ethnicity that, 27 years after the end of a racist and oppressive system, South Africa

has yet to fully heal.

Most of the violence 71 years ago was centred in the multi-ethnic working-class neighbourhood of Cato Manor – Umkhumbane in Zulu. The attacks were orchestrated by provocateurs who mobilised the all-male, all-Zulu hostels in the city as well as other local networks. The anaemic police and army presence did not react to the violence happening in front of it. Donald L Horowitz, in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, describes white women celebrating the violence “dancing up the streets”

My dad and his brothers slept outside among the stalks of sugar cane; for a little boy, the experience was a bewildering mix of fear and adventure



afterwards.

The official count of the devastation was given as 142 deaths and 1,087 injured. A school and a factory were completely destroyed, along with 58 shops and 247 homes, while two factories, 652 shops and 1,285 homes were damaged.

The next night and the night after that, my father’s stepmother and his sisters slept in the homes of their African neighbours. The adult men stood guard over the small farm that my grandfather, whose parents were indentured labourers, had bought in partnership with a cousin after they had saved



Churches and community organisations worked together to clean up the city centre of Pietermaritzburg that was ransacked during unrest in KwaZulu-Natal unrest in July. Despite the cleanup efforts, there is much that is damaged and significant buildings have been burned down. It will take some time before the centre of the city is restored.

Photo: David Larsen / Africa Media Online

enough money working at a local sugar mill. My dad and his brothers slept outside among the stalks of sugar cane; for a little boy, the experience was a bewildering mix of fear and adventure.

On the night of July 13, 2021, I helped my mother and father pack small bags with their identity documents, last wills and testaments, chronic medication. and a change of clothes. My father also packed a small bag with a winter jersey and

treats for their overindulged and overweight dachshund, Toby.

There was no sense of adventure in the air. There was bewilderment. Distress and pain, too. And an unfathomable sense of foreboding that they may have to leave their entire lives behind.

A story of townspeople

My father is 80 years old now. My mother is 77, but she protests that

the apartheid government recorded her date of birth incorrectly. They are both retired school principals who are easily recognised by many in Stanger (KwaDukuza), the working-class town where they have built their lives together, and their home in which my sister and I grew up.

Most adults in Stanger have gone through my parents' schools and both are fondly remembered and respected. For this, if I am recognised as my parents' child, I am usu-

ally guaranteed a wider smile and a warm message for them from these locals. Sometimes I even benefit from a discount at one of the many shops in the town that have passed through generations of the same family.

My parents are solid citizens. People who have worked their whole lives to build and uplift their community. When she was principal of Parkgate Primary School in Ottawa, near Durban, my mother received children from Zwelisha, near Phoenix, and from newly built RDP homes near her school.

Those communities had been relocated from shack settlements from Clare Estate and other parts of Durban. On the occasions that I have met her former students, they have spoken – without hyperbole – of my mother as a role model, of her school being an enabling and life-changing experience for them.

Zwelisha is a decades old shack settlement that dates back to the 1990s. Whatever socio-economic gains have been made in post-apartheid South Africa, precious few have come close to its impoverished edges. It is where, over a few nights in July, 20 people were reported to have been killed in increasing racial violence in KwaZulu-Natal. The tension has been orchestrated by provocateurs apparently intent on stoking race-based civil war in the province by targeting specific communities that have deep-running fractures based on inequality and racial mistrust.

My parents believe that ordinary people build communities and a country. They have a strong affinity for equality. In 2010, when the local municipality sought to build a statue of Mahatma Gandhi to commemorate the 150 years since the arrival of the indentured labourers in South Africa, my fa-

I swung some sports equipment around, wondering if a childhood cricket bat would be enough to fend off an attack

ther petitioned them, on principle, to rather commission a statue celebrating the thousands of indentured labourers themselves. He also pointed out that Gandhi only arrived in South Africa in 1893 as a lawyer, not as a bonded labourer. The KwaDukuza local municipality, as is the wont of the ANC generally, preferred the elite individual over ordinary people.

My parents care about their community and their country.

Yet on July 13 they were preparing, if necessary, to leave their entire lives behind. Photo albums, books, family heirlooms and furniture passed down through generations, birthday cards made by my niece during lockdown. ... Everything that represents who they are, and what they have survived in a country that has often been oppressive to them, but that they still celebrate as their only one. A country that they have helped build without any thought of recognition or self-enrichment. One that they were watching being destroyed in front of their eyes.

I saw a pain in them that no person should have to bear. I discussed connecting the water hose to an indoor tap in case our cars in the front yard were petrol-bombed. I swung some sports equipment around, wondering if a childhood cricket bat would be enough to fend off an attack on their home. I tried not to alarm them, but I cried inside.

A looming race war?

KwaZulu-Natal appears to be careering towards a full-blown civil war. A war instigated by provocateurs on the ground and on social networking platforms like Twitter, along lines of race and class. But mainly race. Indeed, a mode of making claims in the name of race is being actively used to erase the question of class.

It is a race war to which the government, with its failing intelligence-gathering structures, is only now turning its attention. Part of a wider conflict, whose flames have been gleefully cheered on by people, including former president Jacob Zuma's daughter Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla and her twin brother Duduzane, on social media. A race war that has been fomented for several years already by the "anti-Indian" demagoguery of people like EFF leader Julius Malema. One that in recent weeks has been stoked by trolls on Twitter.

There has also been incitement on the ground that began during the early stages of the various recent mobilisations. Even when the looting was primarily focused on malls and shopping centres, provocateurs – some with links to militarised elements – were already engaged in fearmongering about threats to private property among communities and on social networking platforms. Links have been suggested between these provocateurs and the parallel spy structures that Jacob Zuma had built up while he was president of South Africa.

Bodies have started appearing, some quite clearly killed by vigilantes in Phoenix. In other instances, the decomposing bodies of the dead have been found at sites of looting, such as Queen Nandi Drive near Durban.

By July 13, this race-based fear-

mongering and incitement were surging. The previous night, a community patrol in Stanger stopped a car trying to access a predominately “Indian” neighbourhood. The car contained people with petrol bombs. The government seemed completely oblivious to this threat. No police were at hand to arrest or interrogate them.

Stark line of division

The N2 highway that runs north from Durban towards Ermelo in Mpumalanga acts as a dividing line between the haves and have-nots along the KwaZulu-Natal North Coast. On the coastal side of the highway are multimillion-rand beachfront real estate and gated “eco-communities” such as Zululami in Salt Rock and Zimbali in Ballito. The latter is where the African political elite have homes alongside whites and people of South Asian descent, but the majority of these gated communities are populated by minorities.

On the other side of the N2 are shack settlements and long-established of black working-class communities, with several working-class “Indian” areas as well. Places like Shakaskraal and Tongaat, which go back to the late 1800s.

In many instances, these working-class communities’ jobs are found in the malls and homes across the N2. There have been reports of agent provocateurs infiltrating these communities along the North Coast and inciting them not only to attack the malls and shops, but also the homes of the rich, the whites and the “Indians”.

With police presence remaining non-existent since July 9, many of these affluent communities sealed off access from the highway and manned checkpoints themselves. Some have been armed, others

With police presence non-existent since July 9, affluent communities sealed off access from the highway and manned checkpoints themselves

not. Some have been extremely heavy-handed, others not. African people have been racially profiled at these “checkpoints”, with some denied passage because of the colour of their skin and others asked to produce receipts for the goods in their cars. Some of those who were unwilling to do so had their goods confiscated by the armed vigilantes.

Private security companies have helped to protect neighbourhoods and strengthen the vigilantes. By the morning of July 15 the army presence was still negligible, according to various residents.

The racial and class dynamics inherent in these checkpoints have also contributed to the uneasy race-based tensions reaching boiling point in KwaZulu-Natal. But in some instances, African communities on one side of the highway have negotiated with their employers on the other side to create the impression of group mobilisation and the pretence of a stand-off to keep the provocateurs off their backs, and their job and food security intact.

Left to fend for themselves

The police have disappeared from the streets of Stanger and the neighbouring towns of Shaka’s Rock, Shakaskraal, Ballito, Eshowe, Empanjeni and so on. These are towns that, since July 9, have all been

under attack by sinister, external forces that go beyond the politics of hunger that initially drove so many desperate people to steal food.

The security guard at a local mall in Stanger tells me there was intelligence since July 11 about it being attacked. The police were informed but not present. The security company was overwhelmed and the mall was emptied out.

My parents’ home has a view of apartheid’s spatial planning. Across the road from them is an apartheid-era council-built housing estate for working-class people of South Asian descent. It sits next to an industrial area with factories and warehouses. On the other side of the industrial area are the mainly African townships of Lindelani and Shakaville.

As the looting escalated on July 12, its changing profile was evident on my parents’ street. First, men, women and children could be seen carrying food back to their homes – unemployment, inequality and desperation leading so many to break the law, and teach their young children this unconscionable lesson.

After lunch, one watched men walking by with alcohol looted from local shops; some dragged crates of beer behind them along the road. Towards sunset, the clothing and furniture shops were looted and the goods loaded into expensive vans and SUVs. Some people walked by with whatever they could carry home, mainly clothes, paint and appliances ranging from kettles to televisions. From our vantage point, there were fewer fridges and big-screen televisions going into the township.

Most of the shops being looted on that day were in Stanger’s central business district. Apart from a few franchises, most were family-owned businesses. A sports shop where I remember getting my first pair of

football boots decades ago. Shops owned by relatives of people such as former minister Kader Asmal or political activist contemporaries of Chief Albert Luthuli, the Nobel Peace laureate and ANC president who lived in nearby Groutville. People who had sponsored sports tournaments and cultural activities in the town during apartheid, when the white supremacist government sought to inflict a process of reification against us.

By nightfall there would be nothing left in them, or, in some instances, of them – community institutions that had stood for decades. No one knew where the police were.

The mood changes

The next day saw the mall fall. Again, people used the street on which my parents live to access the council estate and the townships pushing trolleys filled mainly with food, booze, clothes, paint and building materials, television sets and bits of small furniture, like the stools cashiers would have sat on.

The mood had changed, however. There were fewer women and children on the street. There were more men. More groups of men started to congregate. More ramped up racial vitriol emerging on social media or videos being circulated on WhatsApp.

People of different races were attacking each other. A video of a Pietermaritzburg community setting fire to a shack settlement went viral. Information started filtering in of proposed attacks and counter-attacks on and by communities in Chatsworth, Umlazi, KwaMashu

People of different races were attacking each other. Video of a Pietermaritzburg community setting fire to a shack settlement went viral

and Phoenix, all working-class townships created by apartheid's Group Areas Act.

My cousin who was part of a group manning a community roadblock nearby reported the situation getting “rowdy” and racialised when cars were stopped. The toxic incitement to race riots continued unabated on social networking platforms. The WhatsApp videos, fake news and hysteria were surging. The national government appeared to be publicly ignorant of what was unfolding in KwaZulu-Natal. The police would not be there to protect people from being attacked in their homes.

I sensed this as much as my parents did. We started to pack a few things.

The year 1949 was not far away from our thoughts. I reread Ronnie Govender's short story, *1949*. I plodded fearfully to its end. Dumisane and his family were hiding his landlord, Mr Maniram – and his family – in the house he rented from them as the crowd sought them out:

“Some ran into the main house and after ransacking it, set fire to it. The flames lit the entire area.

“They're not in the house. They must be in your house!”

‘Listen, my brother. I don't like the amaKulas myself. Please don't go in and frighten my children.’

The crowd stood around hesitantly. Suddenly a young man broke from the crowd and dashed into the house. Within seconds he was shouting, ‘He's lying. They are hiding under the beds!’

All mercy deserted them.

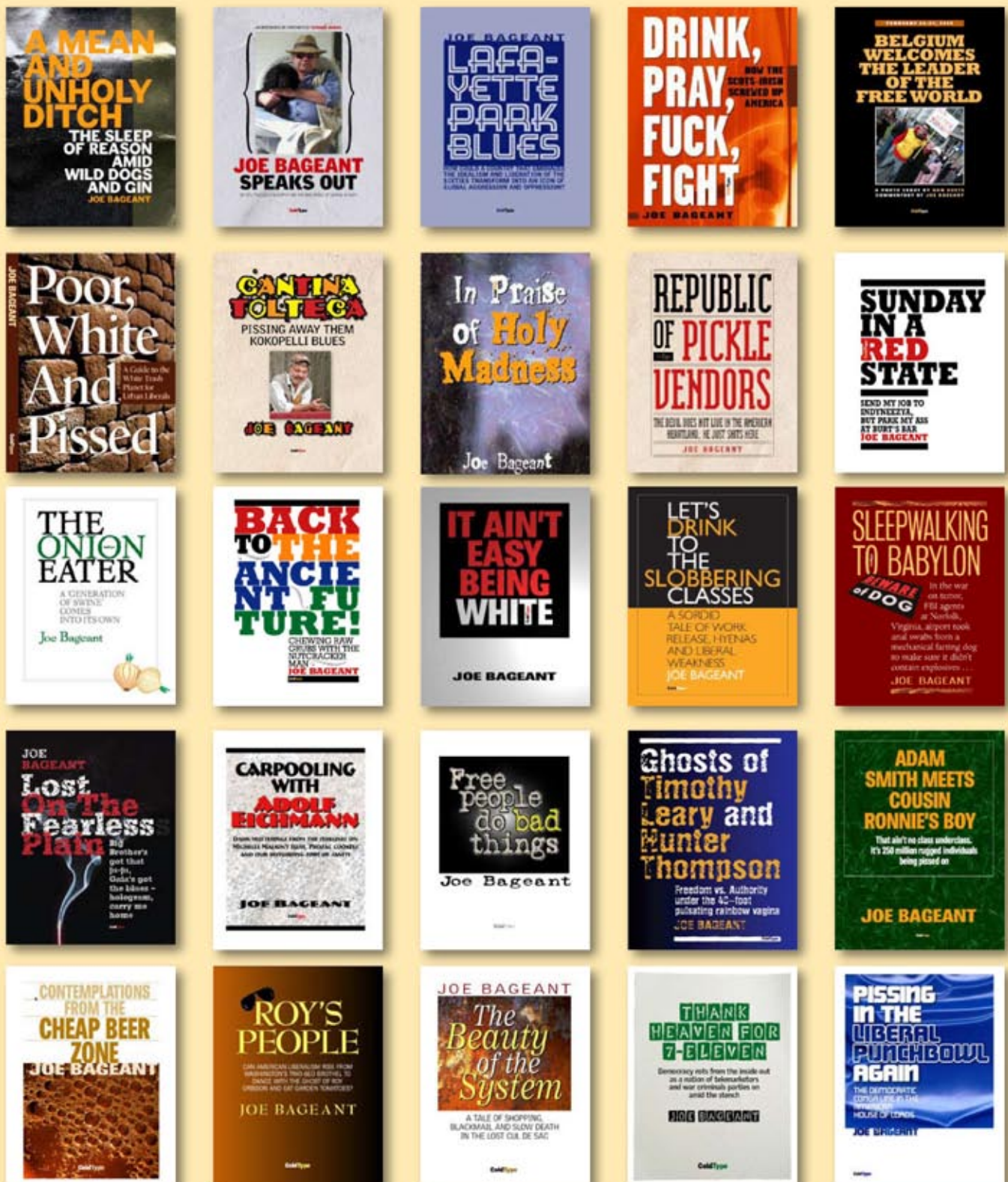
It deserted the souls of fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, giving way to the savagery that lurks eternally in the human heart. Out of the time warp of primeval hate flew the spear. It shot through Dumi's chest. There was no pity, no reason in the hearts of these malleable souls, held captive by minds more savage in their cunning – the cunning on which empires have been built.”

Niren Tolsi is a freelance journalist whose interests include social justice, citizen mobilisation, state violence, football and cricket. This essay was first published in the South African web magazine *New Frame* at www.newframe.com.

David Larsen, whose photograph is used on the opening of this feature, is Managing Director of *Africa Media Online* – <https://africamediaonline.com> – and *African Pictures* – <https://african.pictures> – which aim to enable Africans to tell Africa's story. A former journalist and photographer, Larsen has also been the visionary behind the *Digitise Africa Trust* that aims to raise funds for the digital preservation of significant media and heritage collections in Africa.

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JOE ALLEN

Love letter from a teen sanitorium

Two true stories in one allegory. The names have been changed,
but no one was innocent. Except me

June, 1994
Tennessee

Dear Lisa,

THEY finally locked me up in a padded room. I had to loosen my straightjacket to write this in my own blood. The System did this to me. Yet they have the nerve to say I'm the crazy one.

Just kidding. I'm not in a straitjacket, and this is actually written in my roommate's blood. He's an arm-cutter, so I should be able to write you every week.

Remember our last phone conversation before I got sent off to the loony bin? You said you weren't sure it's cool for a sophomore to date a freshman. Well, if I pass and you fail, we'll both be sophomores next year. So blow off summer school! Then we can be together forever. Soon as I get out.

It's hard to grasp why my parents decided to deal with an unruly kid by locking me up. Yeah, my curiosity gets the better of me. And yeah, I punched my stepdad. He hit me first, so ...

Maybe I'll be more understanding of their fear and desperation when I'm older. Until then, *fuck this shit*. I feel like a fetus yanked out with a coat-hanger and tossed into a toilet. I'm just swimming in circles, shrieking that Sex Pistols song into

the echoing porcelain: "Mummy! I'm not an ANIMAL!"

It's hell in here. One minute, you have amped-up counselors brow-beating you, breaking you down – maybe slamming you against the wall or on the floor – then an hour later, they're consoling you. It's all Pavlov bells ringing in your ears.

The lockdowns are the worst. If you screw up bad, they'll put you in isolation until you'd kill to get out and confess your sins in group therapy. Personal secrets – that's how they getcha.

It'd be one thing if in-patient programmes actually worked to turn us around. But I'm just not seeing it. We're all learning to be co-conspirators in here. Code words and hand-signals. Secret pacts and quiet rebellion.

A lot of these boys have had more sex, drugs, and fist-fights than any teacher or preacher I've ever known. Those old assholes know nothing about real life. You know how my stepdad won't let us close my bedroom door? Well, that's not how it works in every family. At least two of these guys lost their virginity to their dads' girlfriends. In both cases, it was the dad's idea!

One guy, Cody, even got a blowjob from his girlfriend in here. His mom

snuck her in on visitation day. She told admin that Cody's girlfriend was his cousin. This being the South, you'd think they'd be wary of patients having close contact with their hot cousins, but there she was. During the "family visit" in Cody's room, his mom turned her head while his girlfriend dropped to her knees.

His girlfriend snuck him some blotter acid, too. He said he'd share some with me. Cody's the coolest dude I ever met.

I've heard so many awesome war stories, Lisa, it inspires me to be a better man. The minute I get out of here, I'm gonna get us some ecstasy (have you ever even heard of that?) and maybe some coke (met a guy in here who can get me some), and then finally do all the things you talked about on the phone.

My roommate says chicks like it rough. Is that true?

First, though, I've gotta make my escape. It's just a matter of playing the right cards. Learning to fake the right answers. Learning to game The System. The shrinks try to scare us straight, but we're far more afraid of The System itself than any "real world consequences" of our behaviours.

The only real consequence is where we'll end up in The System.



It's like that out in the world, too. For people at the top, it's all about control. So you've gotta be smart and learn to manipulate better than them. That's what Cody says, anyway.

For a lot of these guys, the biggest fear is getting sent to juvenile hall. This program is their one "get out of jail free" card. The next biggest fear is getting sent to a long-term psych facility.

For a few, they're even more afraid of going back home. They'll get the shit beat out of them, daily, for ever winding up in here. I know I complain about my stepdad, but this is very, very different. Some of them have crooked noses and facial scars.

And I'll tell you this – what you told me about your creepy old man? Well, apparently it happens to boys, too. All the time.

The System tears our hearts open, then soothes the bad feelings

by giving us drugs. Every morning and night, we form a long line down the hall. At the front, a nurse hands us our "meds" in a tiny paper shotglass.

Some kids are forced to gobble antidepressants or antipsychotics. Others are given speed for "ADHD". It's like, if you can't fix the guy's situation, just modify his brain until he stops rebelling. They decided I needed Zoloft to "stabilise my mood".

Weren't most of us put in here to get off drugs? Or were we just on the wrong drugs?

I tuck the pills under my tongue,

At this point, that pale, wilted houseplant has eaten more pills than Michael Jackson. Better him than me

then stuff them into the soil of the rubber tree plant in the rec room. At this point, that pale, wilted houseplant has eaten more pills than Michael Jackson. Better him than me. I was born at night, but I wasn't born last night. Psych meds – that's how they getcha.

You know, considering we're locked up in a sterile building, cut off from our families and friends, then forced to reveal every humiliating detail of our lives in front of each other – knowing the revelation will become high school gossip as soon as someone gets out – you'd think the staff would be more sympathetic. But sympathy is just a carrot, and the counsellors are happy to turn the stick around and hit us with it.

Still, I'm learning a lot about sympathy in here. I remember our social studies teacher – you had her last year – once told the class, "White

boys don't have any real problems". Well, I suspect it's her who never had any real problems. She's too arrogant to admit that anything exists beyond her awareness.

The cops have beat plenty of these guys to a pulp. Teachers and principals have, too. One kid swears he had drugs planted on him. Said his only goal in life is to fuck shit up. Says he's "white trash" and proud of it. One of the good kids said, "I'd like to confront you on that. It's not a constructive mindset". Dude just rolled his eyes.

A lot of them grew up in the sticks. Their parents are broke. Their mom comes home with frozen pizza and potato chips, and calls it "groceries". Their parents even get high with their kids. Maybe they think it'll help them grow up faster.

Sometimes I wish my parents were that cool. But the more I listen in group therapy, the less it looks like a 24/7 party. Cody's tale is probably the saddest.

As part of our Twelve Step program, everyone has to declare some Higher Power. (Blind faith – that's how they getcha.) This Higher Power can be anything, really – except drugs. A few kids tried that, but got shot down. So they wind up choosing Jesus or Nature or some dead rockstar. It's like a game.

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Cody's cousins kept wrestling around with him. Then they tore his pants off. One by one, they raped him. ... He was too small to even attempt to fight

Two weeks ago, Cody told the group his Higher Power is "sex". The shrinks were visibly uncomfortable, but they let it go. A few days later, he got busted for frying on that acid. I think he bragged about trippin' to another patient, who snitched to score points with The System. Cody got locked down for a few days. Then this week, our jock counsellors pushed him to make a confession during group therapy.

When Cody was little, he went riding 4-wheelers with his older cousins. They took him way out in the woods, then stopped to get high and drink some whiskey. Cody stared at the floor while he told us, and started to shake. He said his cousins kept wrestling around with him. Then they tore his pants off. One by one, they raped him. Brutally. Laughing. He was too small to

even attempt to fight.

At this point, Cody broke down in tears. Everyone voiced their support. A bigger boy put an arm around him. We all hugged him. I don't know how many in that room will get released and tell everyone at school what happened, but you can be sure one of 'em will.

Cody wasn't lying. He wouldn't lie about that. But he probably thought if he made himself vulnerable, he'd score a few points and get out of trouble. It's crazy – he's only in here because he pawned a neighbour's stereo for dope!

The System betrayed him. Yesterday in group, Cody announced he'd be going to "long-term treatment". He may be gone a year or more. We'd talked about partying together on the outside, but I guess that'll never happen.

I'm learning a lot in here, Lisa, but the biggest thing is this: You can't trust The System. They'll gladly lock you down to get you in line. They'll pry into your deepest fears and desires. They'll toy with your head until you'll do whatever it takes to feel whole again. They'll hold you hostage until the insurance money runs out.

So you gotta do what you gotta do. If I keep playing my cards right, I'll be out of here in no time. I can't wait to have you in my arms again! The whole world will get better. I promise.

See you at the "six ways to Sunday," wherever that is.

Love,

Marty

Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. Presently, he lives in the western shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Read his weekly newsletter at www.JOEBOT.xyz.

JOHN FEFFER

Artificial intelligence wants YOU (and your job)

We'd better start to control machines before they learn how to control us

My wife and I were recently driving in Virginia, amazed yet again that the GPS technology on our phones could guide us through a thicket of highways, around road accidents, and toward our precise destination. The artificial intelligence (AI) behind the soothing voice telling us where to turn has replaced passenger-seat navigators, maps, even traffic updates on the radio. How on earth did we survive before this technology arrived in our lives? We survived, of course, but were quite literally lost some of the time.

My reverie was interrupted by a toll booth. It was empty, as were all the other booths at this particular toll plaza. Most cars zipped through with E-Z passes, as one automated device seamlessly communicated with another. Unfortunately, our rental car didn't have one. So I prepared to pay by credit card, but



the booth lacked a credit-card reader.

Okay, I thought, as I pulled out my wallet, I'll use cash to cover the \$3.25. As it happened, that booth took only coins and who drives around with 13 quarters in his or her pocket? I'd have liked to ask someone that question, but I was surrounded by mute machines. So, I simply drove through the electronic stile, preparing myself for the bill that would arrive in the mail once that plaza's automated system photographed and traced our licence plate.

In a thoroughly mundane fashion, I'd just experienced the age-old conflict between the limiting and liberating sides of technology. The arrowhead that can get you food for dinner might ultimately end up lodged in your own skull. The car that transports you to a beachside holiday contributes to the rising tides – by way of carbon emissions and elevated temperatures – that may someday wash away that very coastal gem of a place. The laptop computer that plugs you into the cyberworld also serves as the conduit through which hackers can steal your identity and zero out your bank account. In the previous century, technology reached a true watershed moment when humans, harnessing the power of the atom, also acquired the capacity to destroy the entire planet. Now, thanks to AI, technology is hurtling us toward a new inflection point.

Science-fiction writers and technologists have long worried about a future in which robots, achieving sentience, take over the planet. The creation of a machine with human-like intelligence that could someday fool us into believing it's one of us has often been described, with no small measure of trepidation, as the



The arrowhead
that can get
you food for
dinner
might ultimately
end up lodged
in your own skull

“singularity”. Respectable scientists like Stephen Hawking have argued that such a singularity will, in fact, mark the “end of the human race”.

This will not be some impossibly remote event like the sun blowing up in a supernova several billion years from now. According to one poll, AI researchers reckon that there's at least a 50-50 chance that the singularity will occur by 2050. In other words, if pessimists like Hawking are right, robots will dispatch humanity before the climate crisis does.

Neither the artificial intelligence that powers GPS nor the kind that controlled that frustrating toll plaza has yet attained anything like human-level intelligence – not even close. But in many ways, such dumb robots are already taking over the world. Automation is currently displacing millions of workers, including those former tollbooth operators. “Smart” machines like unmanned aerial vehicles have become an indispensable part of waging war. AI systems are increasingly being deployed to monitor our every move on the Internet, through our phones, and whenever we venture into public space. Algorithms are replacing

teaching assistants in the classroom and influencing sentencing in courtrooms. Some of the loneliest among us have already become dependent on robot pets.

As AI capabilities continue to improve, the inescapable political question will become: to what extent can such technologies be curbed and regulated? Yes, the nuclear genie is out of the bottle as are other technologies – biological and chemical – capable of causing mass destruction of a kind

previously unimaginable on this planet. With AI, however, that day of singularity is still in the future, even if a rapidly approaching one. It should still be possible, at least theoretically, to control such an outcome before there's nothing to do but play the whack-a-mole game of non-proliferation after the fact.

As long as humans continue to behave badly on a global scale – war, genocide, planet-threatening carbon emissions – it's difficult to imagine that anything we create, however intelligent, will act differently. And yet we continue to dream that some deus in machina, a god in the machine, could appear as if by magic to save us from ourselves.

In the early 1940s, science fiction writer Isaac Asimov formulated his famed three laws of robotics: that robots were not to harm humans, directly or indirectly; that they must obey our commands (unless doing so violates the first law); and that they must safeguard their own existence (unless self-preservation contravenes the first two laws).

Any number of writers have attempted to update Asimov. The latest is legal scholar Frank Pasquale, who has devised four laws to replace Asimov's three. Since he's a lawyer not a futurist, Pasquale is more con-

cerned with controlling the robots of today than hypothesising about the machines of tomorrow. He argues that robots and AI should help professionals, not replace them; that they should not counterfeit humans; that they should never become part of any kind of arms race; and that their creators, controllers, and owners should always be transparent.

Pasquale's "laws", however, run counter to the artificial-intelligence trends of our moment. The prevailing AI ethos mirrors what could be considered the prime directive of Silicon Valley: move fast and break things. This philosophy of disruption demands, above all, that technology drives down labour costs and regularly renders itself obsolescent.

In the global economy, AI indeed helps certain professionals – like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon's Jeff Bezos, who just happen to be among the richest people on the planet – but it's also replacing millions of us. In the military sphere, automation is driving boots off the ground and eyes into the sky in a coming robotic world of war. And whether it's Siri, the bots that guide increasingly frustrated callers through automated phone trees, or the AI that checks out Facebook posts, the aim has been to counterfeit human beings – "machines like me", as Ian McEwan called them in his 2019 novel of that title – while concealing the strings that connect the creation to its creator.

Pasquale wants to apply the brakes on a train that has not only left the station but no longer is under the control of the engine driver. It's not difficult to imagine where such a runaway phenomenon could end up

Military automation is driving boots off the ground and eyes into the sky in a future robotic world of war



and techno-pessimists have taken a perverse delight in describing the resulting cataclysm. In his book *Superintelligence*, for instance, Nick Bostrom writes about a sandstorm of self-replicating nanorobots that chokes every living thing on the planet – the so-called grey goo problem – and an AI that seizes power by "hijacking political processes".

Since they would be interested only in self-preservation and replication, not protecting humanity or following its orders, such sentient machines would clearly tear up Asimov's rulebook. Futurists have leapt into the breach. For instance, Ray Kurzweil, who predicted in his 2005 book *The Singularity Is Near* that a robot would attain sentience by about 2045, has proposed a "ban on self-replicating physical entities that contain their own codes for self-replication". Elon Musk, another billionaire industrialist who's no enemy of innovation, has called AI humanity's "biggest existential threat" and has come out in favour of a ban on future killer robots.

To prevent the various worst-case scenarios, the European Union has proposed to control AI according to degree of risk. Some products that fall in the EU's "high risk" category would have to get a kind of Good

Housekeeping seal of approval (the *Conformité Européenne*). AI systems "considered a clear threat to the safety, livelihoods, and rights of people," on the other hand, would be subject to an outright ban. Such clear-and-present dangers would include, for instance, biometric identification that captures personal data by such means as facial recognition, as well as versions of China's social credit system where AI helps track individuals and evaluate their overall trustworthiness.

Techno-optimists have predictably lambasted what they consider European overreach. Such controls on AI, they believe, will put a damper on R&D and, if the United States follows, allow China to secure an insuperable technological edge in the field. "If the member states of the EU – and their allies across the Atlantic – are serious about competing with China and retaining their power status (as well as the quality of life they provide to their citizens)," writes entrepreneur Sid Mohasseb in *Newsweek*, "they need to call for a redraft of these regulations, with growth and competition being seen as at least as important as regulation and safety".

Mohasseb's concerns are, however, misleading. The regulators he fears so much are, in fact, now playing a game of catch-up. In the economy and on the battlefield, to take just two spheres of human activity, AI has already become indispensable.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of global supply chains. The world economy nearly ground to a halt in 2020 for one major reason: the health of human workers. The spread of infection, the risk of contagion, and the efforts to contain the pandemic all removed workers from the labour force, sometimes temporarily, some-

times permanently. Factories shut down, gaps widened in transportation networks, and shops lost business to online sellers.

A desire to cut labour costs, a major contributor to a product's price tag, has driven corporations to look for cheaper workers overseas. For such cost-cutters, eliminating workers altogether is an even more beguiling prospect. Well before the pandemic hit, corporations had begun to turn to automation. By 2030, up to 45-million US workers will be displaced by robots. The World Bank estimates that they will eventually replace an astounding 85 percent of the jobs in Ethiopia, 77 percent in China, and 72 percent in Thailand”.

The pandemic not only accelerated this trend, but increased economic inequality as well because, at least for now, robots tend to replace the least skilled workers. In a survey conducted by the World Economic Forum, 43 percent of businesses indicated that they would reduce their workforces through the increased use of technology. “Since the pandemic hit”, reports NBC News, “food manufacturers ramped up their automation, allowing facilities to maintain output while social distancing. Factories digitised controls on their machines so they could be remotely operated by workers working from home or another location. New sensors were installed that can flag, or predict, failures, allowing teams of inspectors operating on a schedule to be reduced to an as-needed maintenance crew.”

In an ideal world, robots and AI would increasingly take on all the dirty, dangerous, and demeaning jobs globally, freeing humans to do more

The AI system that monitored Amazon driver's efficiency also used an automated email to fire him

interesting work. In the real world, however, automation is often making jobs dirtier and more dangerous by, for instance, speeding up the work done by the remaining human labor force. Meanwhile, robots are beginning to encroach on what's usually thought of as the more interesting kinds of work done by, for example, architects and product designers.

In some cases, AI has even replaced managers. A contract driver for Amazon, Stephen Normandin, discovered that the AI system that monitored his efficiency as a deliveryman also used an automated email to fire him when it decided he wasn't up to snuff. Jeff Bezos may be stepping down as chief executive of Amazon, but robots are quickly climbing its corporate ladder and could prove at least as ruthless as he's been, if not more so.

Mobilising against such a robot replacement army could prove particularly difficult as corporate executives aren't the only ones putting out the welcome mat. Since fully automated manufacturing in “dark factories” doesn't require lighting, heating, or a workforce that commutes to the site by car, that kind of production can reduce a country's carbon footprint – a potentially enticing factor for “green growth” advocates and

politicians desperate to meet their Paris climate targets.

It's possible that sentient robots won't need to devise ingenious stratagems for taking over the world. Humans may prove all too willing to give semi-intelligent machines the keys to the kingdom.

The 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan proved to be unlike any previous military conflict. The two countries had been fighting since the 1980s over a disputed mountain enclave, Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia proved the clear victor in conflict that followed in the early 1990s, occupying not only the disputed territory but parts of Azerbaijan as well.

In September 2020, as tensions mounted between the two countries, Armenia was prepared to defend those occupied territories with a well-equipped army of tanks and artillery. Thanks to its fossil-fuel exports, Azerbaijan, however, had been spending considerably more than Armenia on the most modern version of military preparedness. Still, Armenian leaders often touted their army as the best in the region. Indeed, according to the *2020 Global Militarisation Index*, that country was second only to Israel in terms of its level of militarisation.

Yet Azerbaijan was the decisive winner in the 2020 conflict, retaking possession of Nagorno-Karabakh. The reason: automation. “Azerbaijan used its drone fleet – purchased from Israel and Turkey – to stalk and destroy Armenia's weapons systems in Nagorno-Karabakh, shattering its defences and enabling a swift advance,” reported the *Washington Post's* Robyn Dixon. “Armenia found that air defence systems in Nagorno-



Karabakh, many of them older Soviet systems, were impossible to defend against drone attacks, and losses quickly piled up”.

Armenian soldiers, notorious for their fierceness, were spooked by the semi-autonomous weapons regularly above them. “The soldiers on the ground knew they could be hit by a drone circling overhead at any time”, noted Mark Sullivan in the business magazine *Fast Company*. “The drones are so quiet they wouldn’t hear the whir of the propellers until it was too late. And even if the Armenians did manage to shoot down one of the drones, what had they really accomplished? They’d merely destroyed a piece of machinery that would be replaced”.

The United States pioneered the use of drones in its war on terror in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and elsewhere across the Greater Middle East and Africa. But in its 2020 campaign, Azerbaijan was using the technology to defeat a modern army. Now, every military will feel compelled not only to integrate increasingly more powerful AI into its offensive capabilities, but also to defend against the new technology.

To stay ahead of the field, the United States is pouring money into the latest technologies. The new Pentagon budget includes the “largest ever” request for R&D, including a down payment of nearly a billion dollars for AI. As *TomDispatch* regular Michael Klare has written, the Pentagon has even taken a cue from the business world by beginning to replace its war managers – generals – with a huge, interlinked network of automated systems known as the Joint All-Domain Command-and-Control (JADC2).

The result of any such handover

In the end,
robots won't
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or automated



of greater responsibility to machines will be the creation of what mathematician Cathy O’Neill calls “weapons of math destruction”. In the global economy, AI is already replacing humans up and down the chain of production. In the world of war, AI could in the end annihilate people altogether, whether thanks to human design or computer error.

After all, during the Cold War, only last-minute interventions by individuals on both sides ensured that nuclear “missile attacks” detected by Soviet and American computers – which turned out to be birds, unusual weather, or computer glitches – didn’t precipitate an all-out nuclear war. Take the human being out of the chain of command and machines could carry out such a genocide all by themselves. The fault would lie not in our robots but in ourselves.

In my new novel *Songlands*, humanity faces a terrible set of choices in 2052. Having failed to control carbon emissions for several decades, the world is at the point of no return, too late for conventional policy fixes. The only thing left is a scientific Hail Mary pass, an experiment in geo-engineering that could fail or, worse, have terrible unintended consequences. The AI responsible for ensuring the success of the ex-

periment may or may not be trustworthy. My dystopia, like so many others, is really about a narrowing of options and a whittling away of hope, which is our current trajectory.

Yet, we still have choices. We could shift toward clean energy and marshal resources for the whole world, not just its wealthier portions, to make the leap together. We could impose sensible regulations on artificial intelligence. We could debate the details of such programs in democratic societies and in participatory multilateral venues.

Or, throwing up our hands because of our unbridgeable political differences, we could wait for a post-Trumpian saviour to bail us out. Techno-optimists hold out hope that automation will set us free and save the planet. Laissez-faire enthusiasts believe the invisible hand of the market will mysteriously direct capital toward planet-saving innovations instead of SUVs and plastic trinkets.

These are illusions. As I write in *Songlands*, we have always hoped for someone or something to save us: “God, a dictator, technology. For better or worse, the only answer to our cries for help is an echo”.

In the end, robots won’t save us. That’s one piece of work that can’t be outsourced or automated. It’s a job that only we ourselves can do. **CT**

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SAM PIZZIGATI

Billionaires blast off. Good riddance!

Could space become the ‘final frontier’ in the struggle for a more equal world? Or just “cynical stunts by disgustingly-rich businessmen”

Three of the richest billionaires on Earth are now busily spending billions to exit our Earth’s atmosphere and enter into space. The world is watching – and reflecting.

Some commentators see our billionaire trio – Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk – as heroic heirs to the legacies of Charles Lindbergh and Sir Edmund Hillary, the first mere mortals to high jump the Atlantic alone and scale the world’s highest mountain.

Our billionaires racing into space, other charmed commentators are adding, aren’t just thrilling humankind. They’re uplifting us. The technologies that the space operations Branson, Bezos, and Musk “develop could benefit people worldwide far into the future”, says Yahoo Finance’s Daniel Howley.

But most of our commentators seem to be taking a considerably more skeptical perspective. They’re dismissing the space antics of Branson, Bezos, and Musk as the ego trips of bored billionaires, “cynical stunts by disgustingly rich businessmen”, as one British analyst puts it, “to boost their self-importance at a time when money and resources are desperately needed elsewhere.”

“Space travel used to be about

Photo: VirginGalactic.com



Mr Dress-Up: Richard Branson suits-up for his flight to the edge of the world.

‘us’, a collective effort by the country to reach beyond previously unreachable limits”, writes author William Rivers Pitt. “That was the Cold War propaganda, anyway, and it had an unavoidable allure. Now, it’s about ‘them,’ the 0.1 percent”.

The best of these skeptical commentators can even make us laugh.

“Really, billionaires?” comedian Seth Meyers asked. “This is what you’re going to do with your unprecedented fortunes and influence? Drag race to outer space?”

Let’s enjoy the ridicule. But let’s not treat the billionaire space race

as a laughing matter. Let’s see it as a wake-up call, a reminder that we don’t only get billionaires when wealth concentrates. We get a society that revolves around the egos of the most affluent among us and an economy where the needs of average people go unmet and don’t particularly matter.

Characters like Elon Musk, notes Paris Max, host of the Tech Won’t Save Us podcast, are using “misleading narratives about space to fuel public excitement” and gain tax-dollar support for various projects “designed to work best – if not exclusively – for the elite”.

The three corporate space shells for Musk, Bezos, and Branson – SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic – have “all benefitted greatly through partnerships with NASA and the US military”, notes CNN Business. Their common corporate goal: to get satellites, people, and cargo “into space cheaper and quicker than has been possible in decades past”.

Branson, for his part, is hawk-ing tickets for roundtrips “to the edge of the atmosphere and back,” at \$250,000 per head. He’s planning some 400 such trips a year, observes British journalist Oliver Bullough, about “almost as bad an idea as racing to see who can burn the rainfor-



ITS THE BRANSON MOBILE! White Knight Two and SpaceShipTwo directly overhead during a fly by at Spaceport America.

est quickest”.

The annual UN Emissions Gap Report last year concluded that the world’s richest 1 percent do more to foul the atmosphere than the entire poorest 50 percent combined. That top 1 percent, the UN report adds, would have to “reduce its footprint by a factor of 30 to stay in line” with the 2015 Paris Agreement targets. Opening space to rich people’s joyrides would stomp that footprint even bigger.

Bezos and Musk seem to have grander dreams than mere space tourism. They’re looking “to colonise the cosmos”, with Bezos pushing “artificial tube-like structures floating close to Earth” and Musk talking up the terraforming of Mars. They essentially see space as a refuge from an increasingly inhospitable

‘Billionaires should not exist ... on Earth or in space, but should they decide the latter, they should stay there’, reads one petition

planet Earth. They expect tax-dollar support to make their various pipe-dreams come true.

And how should we respond to all this? We should, of course, be working to create a more hospitable planet for all humanity. In the meantime, several egalitarian wags have been circulating online petitions that urge our terrestrial authorities not to let orbiting billionaires back on Earth.

“Billionaires should not exist ... on Earth or in space, but should they decide the latter, they should stay there”, reads one petition nearing 200,000 signatures.

Ric Geiger, the 31-year-old automotive supplies account manager behind that effort, is hoping his petition helps the issue of maldistributed wealth “reach a broader platform”.

Activists like Geiger are going down the right track. We don’t need billionaires out to “conquer space.” We need to conquer inequality. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati co-edits *Inequality.org*. His latest books include *The Case for a Maximum Wage* and *The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*



"On the horizon, mountains have arranged themselves rather dramatically, for my sole benefit, I'm sure. Knowing I was coming, they hurried, with girlish giddiness, into place".

LINH DINH

A small town in Albania

Librazhd is no more of a paradise than anywhere else, if only normalcy is allowed to flower. These days in most places, that's like asking for a moon landing

I just had my best sleep in a long time. My dreams were elaborate, meaning my harried mind finally had a chance to iron out a few kinks. In one dream, I was asked to review some miserable literary text, with a few footnotes in French. As I fudged and botched this unwelcomed task, a crowing rooster

saved my ass. I woke up.

I'm paying \$10 a night in Librazhd, an Albanian mountain town of 6,937 people. When I got on the mini-bus in Tirana, the driver thought I had done so by mistake. Looking alarmed, he asked where I was going? Foreigners don't come here.

My room has an air conditioner

that doesn't work. There is hot water. My bathroom is the size of a shower stall, which is perfect, because it also functions, in its entirety, as a shower stall. A shower hose snakes from the puny "Euro Standard" sink, and there's a drain on the floor. At least there's no courtesy comb with lots of hair from previous guests. I have a



"In the middle of a rectangular fountain lie two decapitated heads, one with its eyes wide open. Poetic fragments crawl up the side of a head".

tiny balcony to dry my hand-washed clothing, so technically, I can stay here forever. What else do I need?

The buzzing of cicadas overlays the sound of a gurgling stream. White or yellow butterflies weave, stagger and dip among the shrubs, weeds and wild white flowers. Birds chirp, frogs croak, and stray dogs bark. Looking down, I see grapevines and two cans of Coke, the only trash. In the distance, finger-sized humans walk back and forth, fending off death.

Among tenements lurks the shape of an Orthodox church, with its three-bell tower. There's a basketball court that's always empty, but the daily high has been around 100 degrees, 10 more than usual, for two weeks already. On the horizon, mountains have arranged them-

selves rather dramatically, for my sole benefit, I'm sure. Knowing I was coming, they hurried, with girlish giddiness, into place.

Across the hallway, there's an old guy maybe five steps away from the morgue. Through his thin door, I can hear him hacking. Unlike me, he must use the shared bathroom. With no common language, we can only wave at each other.

Across the hallway, there's an old guy maybe five steps away from the morgue. Through his thin door, I can hear him hacking

This morning, one of the crowing roosters sounded like an infant crying, which tore me up. Even in the most idyllic setting, there's tremendous suffering, of course, one room over or maybe even in one's bed, but what do I know, I just got here. Fully clothed in awful hand-me-downs, we suddenly tumble in, and in clownish rags, if that, we shall book, trailing curses.

Librazhd is distinguished by a rather macabre, black stone monument to two murdered poets, Vilson Blloshmi and Genc Leka. In the middle of a rectangular fountain lie two decapitated heads, one with its eyes wide open. Poetic fragments crawl up the side of a head.

What a concept, to be killed for

one's poetry, but this savagery can only occur in a society that's still civilised, where the most meticulously calibrated language still matters, where there are still verbal shades, hues and textures, not just single words to trigger constantly enraged idiots, as in present-day America! There, poets are too irrelevant to be murdered. It'd be like raping a corpse.

(Even in Philadelphia, there's only one statue of a poet. A modest bust of Whitman is on out-of-the-way Oregon Avenue, in front of the Dunkin' Donuts. Granted, there's the elegant Walt Whitman Bridge, but that was built in 1957.)

Arriving in Librazhd, I headed straight to the centre to get my bearings, and also to find a hotel. As in the rest of Albania, there were cafés everywhere. At the fanciest, there was a panoramic photo of Dresden, that tragic city, jewel of Germany, barbarically destroyed. Shunning all the chichi ones, I eased into a spartan, half obscured joint, away from the main promenade.

At an outside table sat a wiry, leathery man in a polyester polo shirt and beige track pants, on their last legs. Between gulps of raki, he rolled a cigarette with gnarly fingers. Unlike my lame, overly brainy ass, he clearly knew how to swing a hoe without chopping his toes off.

I ordered a large Korca from a boy waiter. Maybe 14, he was brazenly growing his first moustache. Transitioning into a man is no easy challenge, with many, if not most, failing repeatedly until death. Cemeteries worldwide should be filled with this generic epitaph, "I'M SORRY. I FAILED TO BECOME A MAN".

Hanging laundry on a second-floor balcony, a woman accidentally dropped a chunk of wood onto the pavement. Glancing down, she saw

English instructions
in small town Albania
must be fairly good,
for I've encountered
similarly impressive
young people elsewhere

no writhing or dead body, so leisurely returned to her chore. Walking by, an old man in a knitted fez noticed me and smiled. Smiling back, I mumbled and nodded.

After my first swig of Korca, I leaned back, stretched out my legs and felt almost too comfortable, for everything around me was perfectly normal. People talked and laughed. Although open, frank conversations are dear to life, they're too often denied. If you're too distracted or censored from engaging in such, you're in hell.

Bringing me my second Korca, the kid waiter volunteered in crisp English, "Do you need help with anything?"

"Actually, I'm looking for a hotel. Is there one near here?"

It's not a question he had ever encountered, apparently, for he had to consult the next table for a good minute before answering me.

His directions, though, were very fluent and precise, "You go to that corner and turn right. You will then see a bridge, a concrete bridge. There's also a wooden bridge, but don't cross that! About twenty meters after this concrete bridge, there's a gas station. Ask the people there. They'll show you where the hotel is". Now, you try that in whatever Spanish, French or German you can still dredge up from your high school or college days.

English instructions in small town Albania must be fairly good, for I've

encountered similarly impressive young people elsewhere.

In Peshkopi, population 13,251, I talked to a 19-year-old for nearly an hour, and he had no problems following me.

"Man, your English is very good!"

"I was one of the best in my school", he smiled. "We had an essay contest in English. I won it two years in a row!"

"Wow! What did you win?"

"Just a piece of chocolate!" He laughed. "For writing this long essay in English, they gave me a fuckin' piece of chocolate!"

"Ha, ha!"

"We had an American teacher. He was a volunteer. He's gone now".

"So what can you do with your English skills?"

"Nothing, really. I was a waiter at this café. Next month, I'm going to Italy to pick fruits. I will be there for three months, at least. It will be hard work, but at least I'll make money. Here, I can do the same and make no money."

(Most interestingly, he said Albania would be better off if still a part of Turkey, but even as you cringe, remember that it's only natural for a tiny nation to rely on a protector. Unlike this young man, most Albanians think the US will shield them from the wrath or logic of the Serbs, Greeks or whoever. Now, *that's* madness! An Albanian in his '70's told me, "If the US goes down one meter, we'll go down 100!")

With us at the table was another 19-year-old. Studying to be an electrician, he was hoping to land a job in Germany.

Although it is larger than Librazhd, Peshkopi is further inland and higher up, so more remote. There, many people, especially kids,



"As we slouched at the same table, two kids pressed their noses against the café door, to stare at the alien".

really gave me a double take. As I sat at City Coffee, three little girls, none older than seven, walked by me five times. Although they tried to be discreet, one couldn't help but turn back each time, to prolong her scrutiny. It was easy to pick her out, for she had on an "I WAS BORN A UNICORN" sweatshirt. Once, this mythical being even broke into a bright smile, so delighted was she to encounter such an exotic.

Inexorably drawn into an empty Peshkopi café, I found the middle-aged owner sleeping on a cot in the back. Startled awake, he blurted, "Thank you!" and that's the extent of his English. When I tried Italian on him, he could only pick out a word here and there.

After bringing me a \$1 bottle of Tirana Beer, he took out some

pungent, semi-hard white cheese from his ancient fridge, cut it into five pieces and served them, free of charge. Appreciating this gesture, I'd tip him a buck upon leaving, but it was clear he didn't expect it. There was no angling.

As we slouched at the same table, two kids pressed their noses against the café door, to stare at the alien. From his mishmash of

Peshkopi once boasted an Obama Café and Hotel, but it's history. In Kruje, there's a George Bush Bar, a George Bush Bakery and even a George Bush Statue.

Albanian and Italian, I understood he had come from a village south of Peshkopi, but that was all. Mirroring each other, we sat in silence, mostly. Each exhausted in his own way, we stared at the sunset-lit concrete or bare-brick buildings outside his forlorn café.

Passing his business two days later on my way out of town, I noticed someone sitting in the dark. Standing up, he moved into the light to wave goodbye.

Peshkopi once boasted an Obama Café and Hotel, but unlike Barack, it's history. In Kruje, there's a George Bush Bar, a George Bush Bakery and even a George Bush Statue. Near miniscule Kokreve, George Washington's face is painted onto the side of a café. Everywhere, there are Old Glories and Statues of

Liberty. Tragically, Albanians have more faith in the US than Americans themselves.

In five months in Albania, I have been overcharged maybe four times, and all but once very slightly. That is outstanding. When my glasses needed a new screw inserted, an old man in Tirana asked for just 10 cents. I paid him a buck.

Even with too many young people working in Greece, Italy or Germany, etc., the Albanian family is still reasonably intact and healthy. I constantly see parents with children in public, and the kids are happy and confident.

In Berat, three little boys approached me. One asked, “Where are you from?”

“Vietnam.”

“We’re from Albania!”

No shit, kid. It was beautiful.

In Gramsh, population 8,440, two girls walked up to me. The older one, about seven, asked, “Hi, where are you from?”

“Vietnam”. As she considered this odd fact, I added, “It’s close to China”. Satisfied, she intoned, “It’s nice to meet you”, then they marched away, smiling.

I’ve seen kids playing hide and seek, chasing each other around, or climbing up something, unattended, because it’s perfectly safe here. I saw a boy waving a piece of cardboard just for fun, and why not? Since most Albanians only buy used clothing, they’re not likely to buy smartphones for their kids. That’s a hidden blessing. Those who must be plugged in non-stop are lost.

Since my Librazhd hotel has no wi-fi, I wouldn’t know of any fresh global disaster, on top of our orchestrated economic collapse and weather gone berserk. I also don’t

Most Albanians are too poor to buy smartphones for their kids. That’s a hidden blessing. Those who must be plugged in non-stop are lost.

know if Shohei Ohtani has hit more home runs? Seeing American baseball stadiums on TV, you’d think everything is still normal in that gone apeshit society.

The loonier America becomes, the more vehemently its inmates will cling to its media, for at least a travesty of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As your city burns, you can still be soothed by some maritronly drag queen or another Satanic song. Commercial jingles reassure.

As just an ordinary town, Librazhd is no more, or less, of a paradise than anywhere else, if only normalcy is allowed to flower. These days in most places, that’s like asking for a moon landing.

It’s commonly said that boredom is the great curse of small towns. Few have summed this up more memorably than the Spanish painter Antonio Ribas, as recounted by Norman Lewis:

“Here”, said Ribas, “the sickness from which all people suffer is boredom. There is nothing in their heads. They bring up a single child, then they settle to await death. In uneventful lives they will go to any extreme to create an incident. The husband murders a stranger. The wife seduces the priest”. He shook his head. “Fourteen black petticoats hide the most sensual of all bodies”.

I’d posit that boredom-induced

vices are even more common in cities, however. Ample entertainment and dining options don’t slake one’s appetite, but increase it, to the point of frenzy. It’s like watching 500 cable channels or endless porn. With your head or heart hollow, all places are boring.

Plus, your craving to be properly seen and heard is very stingily met, if at all, for there are just so many of you, with a dozen better looking ones right in this subway car. If the city is a vast buffet, and it is visually exhilarating, you’re one of its least items, just a pea, kernel of corn or macaroni, stuck to the hot plate.

A typical cosmopolitan averages 12 masturbations a day, all scientists agree.

Of course, there are great museums, though they bore you to death, and Nepalese, Kurdish, Uzbek and Congolese restaurants, which you haven’t tried, not to mention the Ibليس, Gehena, Beelzebub and Yama’s Court nightclubs, which you can’t afford, but with your next payday loan, you’ll head straight for the world famous Bottomless Pit, with its hundreds of barely-legal girls pole dancing simultaneously.

Although it’s nearly 5pm, I haven’t even had lunch, so I’ll walk three minutes to this ordinarily charming place to chow, for just \$2.50, on pilaf with pork chop, or spaghetti with beef cubes and a hunk of feta cheese. After I polished off my plate yesterday, the lady asked, “A ishte e mire?” I gave her the thumbs up.

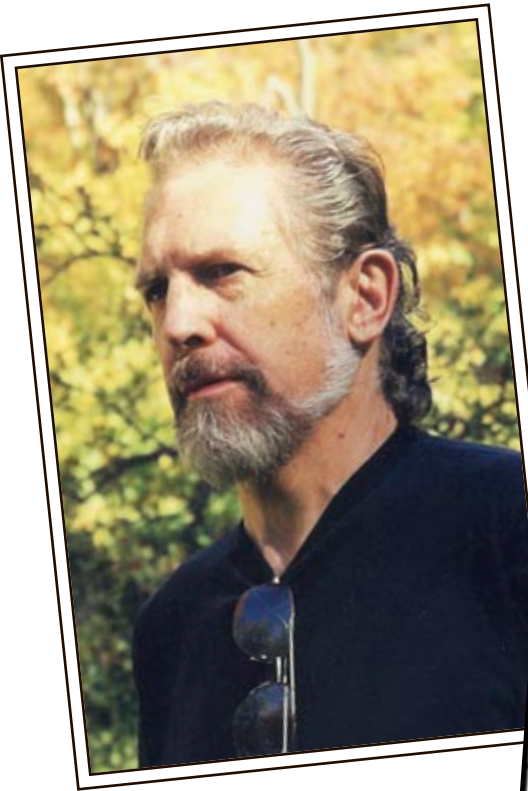
Albanians aren’t big on sauces, herbs or sophisticated seasonings, but simply salt and pepper are more than enough, if done with love.

Normal is enough.

CT

Linh Dinh’s latest book is “Postcards from the End of America”. His maintains a photo blog at www.linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com.

Photo: Shirley Branchini



NO MORE MUSHROOMS:
Thoughts About Life Without
Government
Kirkpatrick Sale
Amazon \$11.95



CHELLIS GLENDINNING

Government be gone

Kirkpatrick Sale’s latest booklet has the potential of introducing its readers to wholly unthought-of horizons for the direction of radical thought and action

You have tried legitimate royalty, manufactured royalty, parliamentary royalty, republics unitary and centralized, and the only thing from which you suffer, the despotism, the dictatorship of the State, you have scrupulously respected and carefully preserved.
—Arthur Arnould, *The Rebel*, 1896

Upon entering a shop filled with household goods, I was greeted by the elderly proprietor. She took one look at me, and without any visual evidence to guide

her thinking regarding my political persuasions, launched into a lengthy and well-informed rant about how the bygone 14-year administration had failed the citizenry of Bolivia and how the current government of the same party was nothing more than a mirror of its predecessor. As she raged on, I felt echoes of my own loss of trust in Lyndon Johnson’s government when, in 1967, nightstick-wielding policemen turned viciously violent at LA’s Century Plaza march against the Vietnam War.

These days I have noticed a similar cynicism about government fes-

tering in every country of the world; no matter what political party or ideology, it seems to be as rampant as the Covid-19 virus. But it also remains pre-political. In other words, naysayers usually attach the problem to a particular administration or leader, a stance that gives them the idea that resolution is merely to elect a different collection of officials.

Now into this snowballing of suspicion and scorn enters Kirkpatrick Sale. At the ripe old age of 83, the historian has penned yet another book, this one a second in his series of Thomas Paine-style pamphlet vol-

umes after *The Collapse of 2020*; the sixteenth in a library of book-length writings that meld his chosen field with those of sociology, political theory, economics, and anthropology.

As any reader familiar with his work might expect, *No More Mushrooms* is a radical analysis of how and why the modern nation-state never succeeds at achieving its stated goals of citizen protection, security, and well-being. Or for any other goal of worth, for that matter. Based on his propensity to make systemic excavations of such topics as the corporate economy, technological progress, and the nation-state, it is no surprise that he sees the very entity of government – based as it is on the amassing of power required to manage gigantic, complex societies – is defunct.

Government simply does not work; it never worked. In Sale's words, "...it is almost self-evident that governments are failing. But I am saying more than that: I am saying governments always fail".

Sale's argument covers not just the unrelenting failures that you and I have read about in history class or witnessed in our lives. His thinking manages to wend its way back to one of the essential themes of his life's work: the issue of size. As the Austrian philosopher Leopold Kohr wrote, "Wherever something is wrong, something is too big". Kirkpatrick Sale is a modern-day exemplar of Kohr, as well as of Thomas Jefferson and Lewis Mumford; he has spent his years exploring the wisdom of face-to-face, human-scale community – and of offshoot matters of which the pursuit of non-State-tendered government is one.

First, Sales takes us through a generalised view of why governments are, at heart, dysfunctional

Sale goes on to offer the reader a litany of examples of how in its wake government has created fiascos one after another

entities. They are based on the Hobbesian precept that they foster the existence of the whole, meaning the State, which in many countries hosts millions and millions of persons. In such constructed bodies the interests of individual, family, and community are thrust aside, all the while the cohesion of government is valued without limit to its actions – and, needless to say, with the intention of preserving its authority. Hence its right to fashion laws that must be obeyed, to submit the populace to its conception of order, to levy taxes, to maintain armies, to declare war, to apply ever more complex hierarchies for achieving these goals – and basically to control all activities while delegitimising resistance or rebellion.

In Sale's view the very motive of government, even when varnished with such mythical niceties as "democracy" and "freedom", becomes the enforcement and expansion of schemes to maintain its privilege. As Sale puts it: "Government is a system of human organisation that lessens individual liberty, nullifies family, and emaciates community, invariably working to enlarge its power at the expense of other organisations. It does not matter what kinds of people are running it, what various combinations of checks and balances may be tried, whatever benefits it may be attempting to achieve, it cannot escape its inherent nature."

Scholars have determined that

some 400 dynasties over 10,000 years have been attempted. Sale cites an impressive, albeit not complete, list of kingdoms, dynasties, regimes, and administrations that – a la Arnold Toynbee – lived but for 100 or 200 (or less) years. Assyrian, Egyptian, Mongrel, Austrian, Qing, Han, etc. His astute, even comical, conclusion: "They seem to be, looked at in the broad perspective of history, temporary arrangements, insubstantial assortments of power, ever-shifting, growing and shrinking and growing, with nothing very consequential in their wakes but some wind-blown temples and decaying palaces".

If the anti-corporate activist Richard Grossman were still among us, he would surely – and passionately – add a cogent detail: the very words penned into the US Constitution protected the rights of a hierarchical class structure and ensured the continuation of inequalities to maintain them. Indeed, Sale goes on to offer the reader a litany of examples of how in its wake government has created fiascos one after another; his case in point is the USA. He delves into a multitude of examples of how the US government has failed at providing doable, effective policies – no matter from what ideological wing it hails, and even when applying the best of intentions.

This section reads like a season's Saturday-morning showings of Three Stooges films. Included are the flops produced by well-meaning policies such as the Community Health Act of 1963 that ended up filling the streets with homeless people, and the 1977 founding of the Department of Energy that was initiated to address nuclear dangers when said power plants were closing, but found its forte in dishwashers built to require a greater use of water than the old models. Indeed, Larry, Curly, and Moe found their way to Washington

for such “accomplishments” – and for which the average citizen pays some \$525,000 over a lifetime!

But a clear line of thinking associating concrete policy with systemic failure becomes fuzzy when Sale launches into the abolition of slavery and the effort at reconstruction. His argument begins to resemble a preference for policies put into place by the governments of Great Britain, Denmark, and France that gave aid to both former slave-owners and slaves – or for Lincoln’s own parallel yet unused proposals made in 1862.

But the case for government’s failure is not over. Sale goes on to cite a plethora of anthropological samplings from world cultures that thrived for centuries – even millennia – without centralisation, but rather with “no political shape, no permanent bodies, no structured rules”. Here he lights up with clarity. Before overrun by imperialist efforts seeking to assimilate their populations or murder them, many human communities lacked complex, top-down systems for organising themselves.

Instead they used not military-style policing, but rather morally-based traditions to guide behaviour. In cases of internal disagreements, wisdom was offered by sacred personages such as “spearmasters”, whose perspectives honoured all sides but was not enforced; while small-scale enactments of conflict with neighbouring groups were made using ceremonial “battles”, a practice of arrows flung ineffectively by their weakest members; etc. You know: our heritage as human beings, that which was created and lived for over a million years before the lunge toward imperial grandiosity; a legacy, Sale proposes, that may even

Sale cites a plethora of anthropological samplings from world cultures that thrived for centuries – even millennia – without centralisation

lay in genetic memory and fuel our relentless protests against injustice, inequality, and militarism.

Perhaps the most illuminating of these is the case of the Dinka. They lived in the savanna country surrounding the swamps of the Nile basin in what is now South Sudan. Its population – at a peak of perhaps 4-million – was divided into small autonomous communities, demonstrating that while equalitarian, sustainable ways may have originated in small-scale groupings, they may not be dependent upon them – as long as those groupings are preserved by fluid ways to break into reduced bands. “Absolutely fundamental to the stateless tribe, in other words”, writes Sale, “is, in both demographic and economic terms, the human scale”.

For the Dinka survival sprung from a combination of animal-raising and horticulture. Survival was local, self-reliant, and wholly liberated from the pressures that come into play with relentless accumulation of possessions and participation in an ever-expanding market economy.

They were governed by practices observed because they were perceived as the most harmonious for the individual, the family, the village, and the tribe. A need for those customs to be legislated and policed simply did not exist: they had everyday meaning.

As Sale explains, “Such disputes as might arise could be handled through local machinery brought into temporary operation for that single occasion and then disbanded, and warfare was such a rarity that to have kept a standing army would have been egregiously wasteful. Thus, in Dinka eyes, a state would be superfluous: with a system as neat as theirs, what earthly use could there be for lawmakers and kings and sheriffs and soldiers?”

All this was destroyed when war was declared against Sudan in the 1980s. Two civil wars followed. At least 300,000 people were killed, many in brutal massacres; millions were forced to relocate, and a famine rampaged through the region causing, it is believed, a million deaths. What was left of the Dinka tribe was herded into capitalist, urban, State-run society. Thankfully, Sale then presents the reader with contemporary examples of still-functioning indigenous cultures as well as recent efforts to apply values of human scale and decentralisation.

In all, *No More Mushrooms* becomes yet another of Kirkpatrick Sale’s ways of perceiving possibility. As with Paine’s writings some 250 years ago, the 100-page booklet is coherent, passionate, persuasive – and has the potential of introducing its readers to wholly unthought-of horizons for the direction of radical thought and action.

As John Cage once wrote, “I can’t understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I’m frightened of the old ones.” **CT**

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CHRIS LANG

When a black boxer beat the Great White Hope

The message from the *New York Times* was clear: If Jeffries won, white superiority would be proved – but if he lost, whites would still be superior

An audacious black heavy-weight champion was slated to defend his title against a white boxer in Reno, Nevada, on July 4, 1910. It was billed as “the fight of the century”.

The fight was seen as a referendum on racial superiority – and all hell was about to break loose in the racially divided United States.

Jack Johnson, the Black man, decisively beat James Jeffries, nicknamed “the Great White Hope”. Johnson’s triumph ignited bloody confrontations and violence between blacks and whites throughout the country, leaving perhaps two dozen dead, almost all of them black, and hundreds injured and arrested.

“No event yielded such widespread racial violence until the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 58 years later”, Geoffrey C. Ward wrote in *Unforgivable Blackness*, his biography of Johnson,

Johnson’s victory, in the manliest of sports, contradicted claims of racial supremacy by whites and demonstrated that blacks were no longer willing to acquiesce to white dominance. Whites were not willing to give up their power. The story has a familiar ring today, as America remains a country deeply divided by race.



Photo: Flickr.com

German Poster by Adolph Friedlander Lithography Company, c 1910, portrays Jack Johnson, the first black world heavyweight boxing champion, as a dignified athlete of magnificent physique. Johnson’s decisive victory led to race riots around the USA.

I began my book, *From Jack Johnson to LeBron James: Sports, Media, and the Color Line*, with Johnson because the consequences of the fight’s aftermath would affect race relations in sports, and America, for decades.

Born in 1878 in Galveston, Texas, Johnson grew up as the Jim Crow

era in American history was getting started. The previous year, Rutherford B. Hayes became president after promising three former Confederate states – South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana – that he would withdraw federal troops, who had protected the measure of racial equality blacks were beginning to achieve.

As federal forces left, whites disenfranchised black voters and passed segregation laws, which were enforced by legal and illegal means, including police brutality and lynching. Journalists, too, sought to maintain social order by preserving myths about white supremacy.

Johnson’s boxing career challenged those myths. He dispatched one white fighter after another and taunted both the fighters and the crowds. He was brash and arrogant and made no attempt to show any deference to whites. He sped through towns in flashy cars, wore expensive clothes, spent his time with gamblers and prostitutes, and dated white women, which black sociologist and commentator W.E.B. Du Bois considered “unnecessarily alienating acts”.

Johnson won the heavyweight title by easily defeating the defending champion Tommy Burns in 1908. Novelist Jack London, writing in the *New York Herald*, wrote about John-



Head-to-head: James Jeffries and Jack Johnson fight for the world heavyweight crown in Reno, Nevada in 1910.

son’s “hopeless slaughter” of Burns and, like other journalists, called on former champion James Jeffries to come out of retirement and “wipe that smile from Johnson’s face.”

Jeffries announced to the world that he would “reclaim the heavy-weight championship for the white race”. He became the “Great White Hope”.

The *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper, said Jeffries and Johnson would “settle the mooted question of supremacy”. The *Daily News*

in Omaha, Nebraska, reported that a Jeffries victory would restore superiority to the white race.

Before the fight, there were signs whites feared a Jeffries loss – and that this loss would not be restricted to the boxing ring but would have ramifications for all of society.

The *New York Times* warned, “If the black man wins, thousands and thousands of his ignorant brothers will misinterpret his victory”. The message was clear: If Jeffries won, white superiority would be proved

– but if he lost, whites would still be superior.

After Johnson easily defeated Jeffries, the *Los Angeles Times* reinforced white supremacy, telling blacks: “Do not point your nose too high. Do not swell your chest too much. Do not boast too loudly. Do not get puffed up. ... Your place in the world is just what is was. You are on no higher place, deserve no new consideration, and will get none”. Nearly a century later, the newspaper apologized for that 1910 editorial.

In response to the violence, many cities forbade a film of the fight to be shown in theatres. In 1912, Congress, citing the same motion picture, passed the Sims Act, banning the transport of fight films over state lines.

In doing so, it kept blacks and whites from seeing Johnson beat a white man. Historian Jeffrey Sammons says, “in many ways, Johnson represented the ‘bad n—’ that whites were so willing to parade as an example of why blacks must be kept in ‘their place’.”

No white boxer could defeat Johnson in the ring, so white America worked to defeat him outside the ring. Johnson was arrested in 1912 and charged with violating the Mann Act, which made it illegal to transport women across state lines “for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose”. He served 10 months in federal prison.

But he was much more than one man. “No longer the respectful darky asking, hat in hand, for massa’s permission, Johnson was seen as the prototype of the independent black who acted as he pleased and accepted no bar to his conduct,” Randy Roberts wrote in *Papa Jack*, his biography of Johnson. “As such,

THE LEAVENWORTH TIMES.

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS, TUESDAY JULY 5, 1910

JOHNSON, BIG BLACK, KNOCKS OUT JEFFERIES IN FIFTEENTH ROUND

After a Terrible Beating and Bruising and Two Knockdowns In One Round, The White Challenger Throws Up The Sponge, Unable To "Come Back."

Ex-Champ is Not Counted Out

Referee Rickard Dubbed Johnson Heavyweight Champion of The World when only Seven Seconds of Jeff's Last Down Had Been Ticked off, But The Big White would never Have Gotten on His Feet Inside of The Ten Ticks.

Reas, Nev., July 4.—John Arthur Johnson, a Texas negro, the son of an American slave, tonight is the first and undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

James J. Jeffries of California, winner of 22 championship fights, the man who never was brought to his knees before by a blow, tonight passed into history as a broken idol. He met utter defeat at the hands of the black champion.

Jeffries was not counted out. As the timekeeper's hand moved up and down, the towel was brought into the ring from Jeffries' corner. Whether counted out or not is unobtainable.



Jack Johnson.

LEAVENWORTH HAS QUITE UNEXPECTED 'SANE' JULY 4TH

ONLY TWO ACCIDENTS REPORTED AND THEY ARE NOT SERIOUS—TWO BOYS THE VICTIMS.

PREVIOUS 4TH'S A LESSON

By Stump in Sale of Dangerous Explosives Indicates That Secret of "Sane" Celebration Lies in Fact That Parents Took Initiative.

A Fourth without any serious accidents.

It appears from yesterday's record that a "sane" Fourth was observed in Leavenworth—and it did not require a law to force "home" the lesson of past years.

As far as could be learned last night there were only two accidents in this city and they were not serious. Only Edward Thell of Tenth and Pawnee and August Orzechowski will be wearing bandages for a week or so.

Edward had a little toy cannon. The rest is an old story. There was a premature explosion and the boy's face was powder burned. His eyes were slightly injured, but his sight will not be affected.

August's black cartridge mistal missed.

west of town. The picnic has been planned for some time, and was well attended. The crowd left at 6:30 last night, and supper was served at 7. After that there was a fireworks display, and a general good time.

CHIEF JUSTICE FULLER DIED OF HEART FAILURE

Sherborn, Maine, July 4.—In fulfillment of an oft-expressed wish that he might end his long life in the very room where his wife breathed her last six years ago, Melville W. Fuller, the venerable chief justice of the supreme court, died suddenly of heart failure today. Not only did he round out his days in the same room where his wife passed away, but it was in the state of his anxiety that his long life ended. Chief Justice Fuller was 77 years old.

HOXSEY FLEW AIRSHIP AT PITTSBURGH FOURTH.

Pittsburg, Kan., July 4.—A Hoxsey made four successful flights this afternoon at the aviation ground here with a Wright Brothers' biplane before a big Fourth of July crowd. The first three minutes in maneuvers about the field. The fourth was an attempt to set a new high altitude mark, but strong wind currents in the upper air prevented the machine going above 1,100 feet.

VETERAN FOUND DYING ON INTERURBAN LINE

John Drenahan Picked Up by Car Crew and Taken to Kansas City, Kan., Hospital Where He Died.

John Drenahan a veteran of the Civil War, was found by the crew of

SERIOUS RACE RIOTS MAY BE THE RESULT OF BIG PRIZE FIGHT

Victory of The Negro Champion Causes Open Ruptures Between Whites and Blacks In Which Several Lives are Lost and Many Injured

A Big Tumult In St. Louis

Police Almost Overpowered In a Small Street Fight—Eight are Injured at Joplin—Negroes at Hutchinson Become Religious Fanatics—Riots are Reported From New York To New Orleans, with Large Police Forces In Most Places.

Reports from all parts of the country indicate that much racial animosity has been stirred up as a result of the victory of Johnson over Jeffries. Stories of riots and near-riots come from every state in the union. In some cases lives were lost, in others many were injured in pitched battle between whites and negroes. The celebration of the

The Leavenworth Times in Kansas on July 5, 1910, published news of Johnson's win and racial violence across the nation.

Johnson was transformed into a racial symbol that threatened America's social order".

Whites responded to Johnson's triumph by using violence to keep blacks in their place by any and all means. When black construction workers celebrated Johnson's victory near the town of Uvalda, Georgia, whites began shooting. As the blacks tried to escape into the woods, the whites hunted them down, killing three and injuring five, Roberts wrote.

Such scenes were repeated throughout the country, according to local media reports.

When a black man in Houston expressed his joy over the fight's outcome, a white man "slashed his throat from ear to ear". Another black man in Wheeling, West Virginia, who was driving an expensive car, just like Johnson was known for, was dragged from his car by a mob and lynched. A white mob in New York City set fire to a black tenement and then blocked the doorway to keep the occupants from escaping.

Johnson's punishment served as a cautionary tale for blacks during the Jim Crow era. Black athletes, however talented, whether it was sprinter Jesse Owens or boxer Joe Louis, were warned they had to be the "right type" of black person, one who knew his place and did not challenge the racial status quo.

In those sports where blacks were not banned and instead begrudgingly allowed to compete with and against whites, there were violent attacks on black athletes. Jack Trice, an Iowa State football player, died of injuries from the attack he suffered in a game against the University of Minnesota in 1923.

The end of professional baseball's

When a black man in Houston expressed his joy over the fight's outcome, a white man "slashed his throat from ear to ear"

colour line in 1946 line was possible only because Jackie Robinson promised he would not respond to racist epithets and physical abuse so that he would be acceptable to white America.

In the 1960s, white America taught Muhammad Ali, whom many considered the "wrong type" of Black athlete, the lesson it had once taught Jack Johnson. Ali, a brash Muslim who refused to defer to the demands of white supremacy, was convicted of draft evasion for refusing to be inducted into the armed services. He was stripped of his heavyweight title and sentenced to prison.

Other black athletes, such as sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, baseball player Curt Flood and football player Colin Kaepernick, all found themselves punished and ostracised for challenging white supremacy. CT

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TOM ENGELHARDT

Empire! The forbidden word

Is this country
heading for the exit?

It was so long ago, in a world seemingly without challengers. Do you even remember when we Americans lived on a planet with a recumbent Russia, a barely rising China, and no obvious foes except what later came to be known as an “axis of evil,” three countries then incapable of endangering this one? Oh, and, as it turned out, a rich young Saudi former ally, Osama bin Laden, and 19 hijackers, mostly of them also Saudis, from a tiny group called al-Qaeda that briefly possessed an “air force” of four commercial jets. No wonder this country was then touted as the greatest force, the superest superpower ever, sporting a military that left all others in the dust.

And then, of course, came the launching of the Global War on Terror, which soon would be normalized as the plain-old, uncapitalised “war on terror.” Yes, that very war – even if nobody’s called it that for years – began on September 11, 2001. At a Pentagon partially in ruins, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, already aware that the destruction around him was probably Osama bin Laden’s responsibility, ordered his aides to begin planning for a retaliatory strike against... Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Rumsfeld’s exact words

(an aide wrote them down) were: “Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not”.

Things related and not. Sit with that phrase for a moment. In their own strange way, those four words, uttered in the initial hours after the destruction of New York’s World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, still seem to capture the 21st-century American experience.

Within days of 9/11, Rumsfeld, who served four presidents before recently stepping off this world at 88, and the president he then worked for, George W. Bush, would officially launch that Global War on Terror. They would ambitiously target sup-

posed terror networks in no less than 60 countries. (Yep, that was Rumsfeld’s number!) They would invade Afghanistan and, less than a year and a half later, do the same on a far grander scale in Iraq to take down its autocratic ruler, Saddam Hussein, who had once been a hand-shaking buddy of the secretary of defense.

Despite rumours passed around at the time by supporters of such an invasion, Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11; nor, despite Bush administration claims, was his regime then developing or in possession of weapons of mass

destruction; nor, if we didn’t act, would an Iraqi mushroom cloud have one day risen over New York or some other American city. And mind you, both of those invasions and so much more would be done in the name of “liberating” peoples and spreading American-style democracy across the Greater Middle East. Or, put another way, in response to that devastating attack by those 19 hijackers armed with knives, the US was preparing to invade and dominate the oil-rich Middle East until the end of time. In 2021, almost two decades later, doesn’t that seem like another lifetime to you?

By the way, you’ll note that there’s one word missing in action in all of the above. Believe me, if what I just

described had related to Soviet plans during the Cold War, you can bet your bottom dollar that word would have been all over Washington. I'm thinking, of course, of "empire" or, in its adjectival form, "imperial". Had the Soviet Union planned similar acts to "liberate" peoples by "spreading communism", it would have been seen in Washington as the most imperial project ever. In the early years of this century, however, with the Soviet Union long gone and America's leaders imagining that they might reign supreme globally until the end of time, those two words were banished to history.

It was obvious that, despite the unprecedented 800 or so military bases this country possessed around the world, imperial powers were distinctly a thing of the past.

Now, keep that thought in abeyance for a moment, while I take you on a quick tour of the long-forgotten Global War on Terror. Almost two decades later, it does seem to be drawing to some kind of lingering close. Yes, there are still 650 American troops guarding our embassy in the Afghan capital, Kabul, and there is still that "over-the-horizon capacity" the president cites for US aircraft to strike Taliban forces, even if American troops only recently abandoned their last air base in Afghanistan; and yes, there are still about 2,500 American troops stationed in Iraq (and hundreds more at bases across the border in Syria), regularly being attacked by Iraqi militia groups.

Similarly, despite the withdrawal of US forces from Somalia as the Trump years ended, over-the-horizon airstrikes against the terror group al-Shabaab, halted when Joe Biden entered the Oval Office, have just been started again, assumedly



from bases in Kenya or Djibouti; and yes, the horrendous war in Yemen continues with the US still supporting the Saudis, even if by offering "defensive", not "offensive" aid; and yes, American special operators are also stationed in staggering numbers of countries around the globe; and yes, prisoners are still being held in Guantanamo, that offshore Bermuda Triangle of injustice created by the Bush administration so long ago. Admittedly, officials in the new Biden Justice Department are at least debating, however indecisively, whether those detainees might have any due process rights under the Constitution (yes, that's the US Constitution!) and their numbers are at a historic low since 2002 of 39.

Still, let's face it, this isn't the set of conflicts that, once upon a time, involved invasions, massive air strikes, occupations, the killing of staggering numbers of civilians, widespread drone attacks, the disruption of whole countries, the uprooting and displacement of more than 37-million people, the deployment at one point of 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan alone, and the spending of untold trillions of American taxpayer dollars, all in the name of fighting terror and spreading democracy. And think of it as mission (un)accomplished in the truest sense imaginable.

In fact, that idea of spreading

of democracy didn't really outlast the Bush years. Ever since, there's been remarkably little discussion in official Washington about what this country was really doing as it warred across significant parts of the planet. Yes, those two decades of conflict, those "forever wars", as they came to be called first by critics and then by anyone in sight, are at least winding, or perhaps spiralling, down – and yet, here's the strange thing: Wouldn't you think that, as they ended in visible failure, the Pentagon's stock might also be falling? Oddly enough, though, in the wake of all those years of losing wars, it's still rising. The Pentagon budget only heads ever more for the stratosphere as foreign policy "pivots" from the Greater Middle East to Asia (and Russia and the Arctic and, well, anywhere but those places where terror groups still roam).

In other words, when it comes to the US military as it tries to leave its forever wars in someone else's ditch, failure is the new success story. Perhaps not so surprisingly, then, the losing generals who fought those wars, while eternally promising that "corners" were being turned and "progress" made, have almost all either continued to rise in the ranks or gotten golden parachutes into other parts of the military-industrial complex. That should shock Americans, but really never seems to. Yes, striking percentages of us support leaving Afghanistan and the Afghans in a ditch somewhere and moving on, but it's still generally a big "thank you for your service" to our military commanders and the Pentagon.

Looking back, however, isn't the real question – not that anyone's asking – this: What was America's mission during all those years? In reality, I don't think it's possible to answer that or explain any of it without using the forbidden noun and adjective

I mentioned earlier. And, to my surprise, after all these years when it never crossed the lips of an American president, Joe Biden, the guy who's been insisting that "America is back" on this failing planet of ours, actually used that very word!

In a recent news conference, irritated to find himself endlessly discussing his decision to pull US forces out of Afghanistan, he fielded this question from a reporter: "Given the amount of money that has been spent and the number of lives that have been lost, in your view, with making this decision, were the last 20 years worth it?"

His response: "I argued, from the beginning [in the Obama years], as you may recall – it came to light after the administration was over... No nation has ever unified Afghanistan, no nation. Empires have gone there and not done it".

So, there! Yes, it was vague and could simply have been a reference to the fate in Afghanistan, that famed "graveyard of empires", of the British empire in the 19th-century and the Soviet one in the 20th-century. But I can't help thinking that a president, however minimally, however indirectly, however much without even meaning to, finally acknowledged that this country, too, was on an imperial mission there and globally as well, a mission not of spreading democracy or of liberation but of domination. Otherwise, how the hell do you explain those 800 military bases on every continent but Antarctica? Is that really spreading democracy? Is that really liberating humanity? It's not a subject discussed in this country, but believe me, if it were any other place, the words "empire" and "imperial" would be on all too many lips in Washington and the urge to dominate in such a fashion



would have been roundly denounced in our nation's capital.

Here's a question for you: If the US is "back", as our president has been claiming, what exactly is it back as? What could it be, now that it's proven itself incapable of dominating the planet in the fashion its political leaders once dreamed of? Could this country, which in these years dumped trillions of taxpayer dollars into its forever wars, now perhaps be reclassified as a failing empire with a flailing military?

Of course, such a possibility isn't generally acknowledged here. If, for instance, Kabul falls to the Taliban months from now and US diplomats need to be rescued from the roof of our embassy there, as happened in Saigon in 1975 – something the president has vehemently denied is even possible – count on one thing: a bunch of Republicans and right-wing pundits will instantly be down his throat for leaving "too fast". (Of course, some of them already are, including, as it happens, the very president who launched the 2001 invasion, only to almost instantly refocus his attention on invading Iraq.)

Even domestically, when you think about where our money truly goes, inequality of every sort is only growing more profound, with America's billionaires ever wealthier and more numerous, while the Pentagon and

those weapons-making corporations float ever higher on taxpayer dollars, and the bills elsewhere go unpaid. In that sense, perhaps it's time to start thinking about the United States as a failing imperial system at home as well as abroad. Sadly, whether globally or domestically, all of this seems hard for Americans to take in or truly describe (hence, perhaps, the madness of Donald Trump's America). After all, if you can't even use the words "imperial" and "empire", then how are you going to understand what's happening to you?

Still, forget any fantasies about us spreading democracy abroad. We're now in a country that's visibly threatening to lose democracy at home. Forget Afghanistan. From the January 6 assault on the Capitol to the latest (anti-)voting laws in Texas and elsewhere, there's a flailing, failing system right here in the US of A. And unlike Afghanistan, it's not one that a president can withdraw from.

Yes, globally, the Biden administration has seemed remarkably eager to enter a new Cold War with China and "pivot" to Asia, as the Pentagon continues to build up its forces, from naval to nuclear, as if this country were indeed still the reigning imperial power on the planet. But it's not.

The real question may be this: Three decades after the Soviet empire headed for the exit, is it possible that the far more powerful American one is ever so chaotically heading in the same direction? And if so, what does that mean for the rest of us? **CT**

Tom Engelhardt created and runs the website www.tomdispatch.com – where this essay first appeared. He is a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of a highly praised history of American triumphalism in the Cold War, *The End of Victory Culture*.

LEE CAMP

Who uses bioweapons on their own people?

Forget China-bashing conspiracy theories, let's look at the unpleasantries perpetrated by the CIA and US military in our not-so-distant past

The Biden Administration, the mainstream media and pretty much all the politicians in the US continue to throw fuel on the Sino-phobia fire initially stoked by former President and current Mar-a-lago “fungineer” Donald Trump.

During the Trump Administration, the Wuhan lab leak theory was called a ridiculous conspiracy that blossomed out of Trump’s racist brain – which it did. It absolutely did. And he should get some credit for that because anyone can be racist but Trump is a racist inventor. He comes up with new and exciting ways to be racist. So he deserves some credit for his innovation.

Last year, Trump’s racist lab leak theory was thrown out by both the Democratic establishment and most of the mainstream media. However, now that the crackpot conspiracy can be useful for President Biden’s deranged anti-China rhetoric, all of a sudden the establishment and the media think it’s a wonderful conspiracy.

A recent CNN headline blared: “What the lab-leak theory’s new credibility means for social media!” A CNBC headline screamed: “Biden orders closer review of Covid origins as US intel weighs Wuhan lab leak theory.” While just a couple weeks

ago, Yahoo News quietly reminded us: “There’s still no evidence of a Chinese lab leak”.

But mainly you have to go to independent news sources to get the reality. Here’s Danny Haiphong at *Black Agenda Report*: “Similar to Russiagate, US intelligence has run with an entirely unsourced narrative, that conveniently pins blame on another country for domestic ills and labels that country a ‘national security’ threat. ... The lab leak conspiracy is an effective psychological operation because it is difficult to imagine evidence that could disprove or prove the claim”.

Ah, those are the best kind of racist stories – the ones that can’t be disproven.

But one thing you’ll certainly never hear from the mainstream media

The victim lies on the ground, pleading, screaming as another man, swinging a machete, forces him to place his right arm on a wooden bench

is that all of this is stacked on top of a mostly-forgotten, yet impressively prodigious, history of the American people probably being used as lab rats by our own government. For example, as reported at *Business Insider*, “On September 20, 1950, a US Navy ship just off the coast of San Francisco used a giant hose to spray a cloud of microbes into the air and into the city’s fog. The military was testing how a biological weapon attack would affect the 800,000 residents of the city”.

So they, uh, perpetrated a biological attack on American citizens to find out what would happen in the event of a biological attack on American citizens?! ... Honestly, the mind reels. In one of the largest human experiments in history, our military covered the people of San Francisco with “...two kinds of bacteria, *Serratia marcescens* and *Bacillus globigii*...”. (Nowadays you can only find that kind of treatment from Cleveland’s tap water.)

The gas attack sickened many and was known to kill at least one man. According to Rebecca Kreston at *Discover* magazine, this event ranked as one of the largest offences against the Nuremberg Code since its inception because the code requires voluntary, informed consent to, you know, hit people

with bioweapons. (Unless you're trying to kill them, in which case I think the informed consent is off the table.)

But that experiment did not mark the end of such things, just the beginning. "Over the next 20 years, the military would conduct 239 'germ warfare' tests over populated areas, according to news reports from the 1970s – after the secret tests had been revealed – in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Associated Press, and other publications, and also detailed in congressional testimony from the 1970s".

After it came out, the government explained that their goal was to deter the use of biological weapons and be prepared for them. Apparently we wanted to deter biological weapons attacks on Americans by dropping biological weapons on Americans first. What a genius strategy. Our enemies would never see it coming. Plus, why would our global nemeses attack us with germ warfare if we do it to ourselves? You can't threaten to kill a man if he wants to die!

Of the 239 biological and chemical warfare tests by the military, some were done across the Midwest to see how the pathogen would spread throughout the country (and probably to clear out some parking spots). When asked why military planes were dispersing unknown clouds of shit over cities, they claimed they were testing a way to mask the cities from enemy bombers.

In another study of how vulnerable New York City subway passengers were to covert biological agents, for six days the US military broke light bulbs brimming full of the bacteria *Bacillus*

Apparently we wanted to deter biological weapons attacks on Americans by dropping biological weapons on Americans first

subtilis and *S. marcescens* inside NYC subway stations and watched it spread throughout the city. "Clouds would engulf people as trains pulled away, but documents say that the people 'brushed their clothing and walked on.' No one was concerned."

That's New York for ya. Hit commuters with germ warfare – they just brush it off and keep moving. Every day to a New Yorker is germ warfare. I once rode from Montauk to Hoboken sitting across from a man relieving himself. A little experiment by the Military Industrial Complex doesn't even register on a New Yorker's list of things to worry about.

Yet, the military was testing more than just germ attacks. "Other experiments involved testing mind-altering drugs on unsuspecting citizens."

That programme went by the name MKUltra (which is also a great name for a metal band or a homemade cocktail containing absinthe). MKUltra continued for twenty years, during which the CIA tried to achieve mind control by using torture, LSD, hypnosis, and electro-shock therapy – sometimes on unwitting subjects. (And even if they were witting going into the experiment, afterwards not so much.)

Among other things, this programme resulted in the murder of a scientist named Frank Olson in

1953 and (accidentally) the creation of the Unabomber. (Who said the CIA doesn't work hard? They're killin' people here, electrocutin' people there, creatin' terrorists. That's a hell of a workload.)

Next, there's the well-known Tuskegee Experiments in which "... government researchers studied the effects of syphilis on black Americans without informing the men that they had the disease – they were instead told they had 'bad blood.'"

"Not to worry, young man – you just have bad blood. It's gonna be fine. But you will also die soon. That's one of the negative side effects".

The researchers withheld treatment from the participants so they could continue to study the illness, which the men weren't even told they had.

In sum, the Military Intelligence Industrial Complex are serial murderers – not just overseas – but of our own citizens. They performed hundreds of experiments on unsuspecting Americans, and yet the organisations responsible still exist and enjoy budgets in the hundreds of billions of dollars a year. No one went to prison for these heinous acts because when you or I do it, it's called "a horrible crime," but when the ruling elite do it, it's called "research". **CT**

Lee Camp is the host and head writer of the comedy news TV show Redacted Tonight with Lee Camp. This is a chapter from Camp's new book Bullet Points & Punch Lines, which features an intro by Jimmy Dore and a foreword by Chris Hedges. Grab a copy at www.LeeCampBook.com. This article first appeared at www.ScheerPost.com

ROKESHIA RENNÉ ASHLEY

Sarah Baartman and her hips of empowerment

They went from being a symbol of exploitation to a source of empowerment for black women

In *Black Effect*, a track from Beyoncé and Jay-Z's 2018 collaborative album *Everything Is Love*, Beyoncé describes a quintessential black female form:

*Stunt with your curls, your lips,
Sarah Baartman hips*

*Gotta hop into my jeans like I hop
into my whip, yeah*

The celebration of Sarah Baartman's features marks a departure from her historical image.

Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman was an African woman who, in the early 1800s, was something of an international sensation of objectification. She was paraded around Europe, where spectators jeered at her large buttocks.

With celebrities like Beyoncé recognising Baartman's contributions to the ideal black female body – and with the curvaceous posteriors of black women lauded on TV and celebrated on social media – I wanted to understand how this ideal is viewed by the very people it most directly affects: black women.

So I interviewed 30 black women from various cities in South Africa and the mid-Atlantic US and asked them about Baartman. Would her image represent a reviled past or a canvas of resilience? Were they proud to bear a similar buttocks or ashamed to share a similar stature?

Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa, left her native land in the early 1800s for Europe; it's unclear whether she went willingly or was forced to do so. Showmen exhibited her throughout Europe, where, in an embarrassing and dehumanising spectacle, she was forced to sing and dance before crowds of white onlookers.

Often naked in these exhibitions, Baartman was sometimes suspended in a cage on stage while being poked, prodded and groped. Her body was characterised as grotesque, lascivious and obscene because of her protruding buttocks, which was due to a condition called steatopygia that occurs naturally among people in arid parts of southern Africa. She also had elongated labia, a physical feature derogatorily referred to as a "Hottentot apron."

Both became symbolic markers of racial difference, and many other women from this part of Africa were trafficked to Europe for white entertainment. Because they diverged so drastically from dominant ideas of white feminine beauty, Baartman's features were exoticised. Her voluptuous and curvaceous body – mocked and shamed in the West – was also de-

scribed in advertisements as the "most correct and perfect specimen of her race".

Of course, Black women's bodies vary; there is no monolithic – nor ideal – type. Nonetheless, there is a strong legacy of the curvaceous ideal, more so than in other races. It persists to this day.

In my interviews, black women revealed how they felt about Baartman's story, how they compared her to their own body image and what her legacy represents.

One American participant, Ashley, seemed to recognise how entrenched the Baartman ideal has become.

"[Baartman] was the platform for stereotypes", she said. "She set the trend for black women [to] have these figures and ... now these stereotypes are carrying through pop culture".

Mieke, a South African woman, described being proud of her proportions and the way they're connected to Baartman, saying, "I'm proud of my body because of the resemblance I feel it has with hers".

Today, the Baartman body can be advantageous, especially on social media, where black women have the opportunity to produce content that's socially and culturally relevant to them and their audiences



Sarah Baartman was an international sensation of objectification.

– and where users can make money off their posts.

On various platforms, women leverage their looks to obtain paid advertisements or receive free gifts, services or merchandise from various beauty and apparel companies. They're also more likely to gain more followers – and perhaps attract more wealthy suitors, depending on

their ambitions – by hewing more closely to the contemporary Baartman ideal.

So you could argue that black women are taking control of their objectification and commodification to earn money. They're also protesting the ideals of white mainstream beauty, seizing Baartman's exploitation and mockery and recasting her

as a source of pride and empowerment on places like #BlackTwitter, Instagram and OnlyFans.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that Baartman's image is rooted in a legacy that is engulfed by slavery, unwillful submission and colonialism. The white gaze that fetishised Baartman's body as exotic and overtly sexual was the same one that promulgated the stereotype that black women were sexually promiscuous, lascivious and hypersexual.

While Baartman may not have been able to keep the cash people paid to ogle at her, Black women today can strive for her body type and make money off it. Once subjected to the mockery of an insidious white gaze, Baartman's physique is now profitable – as long as these women are comfortable with being objectified.

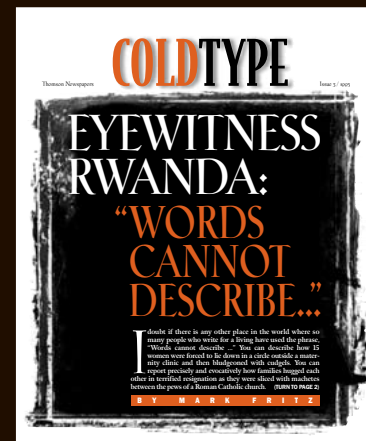
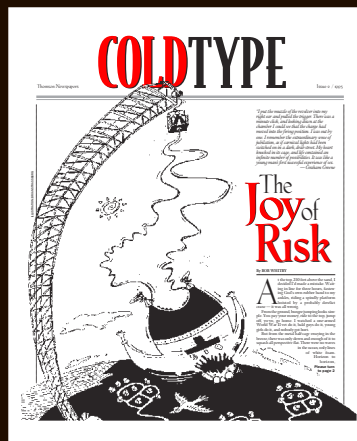
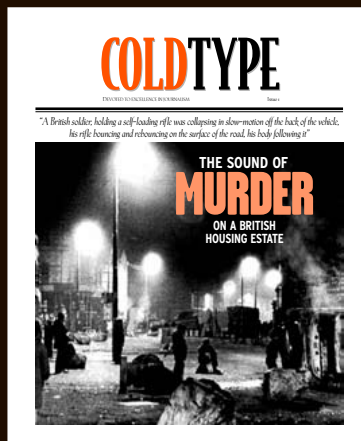
But is selling this body type always a form of empowerment? Would someone who wasn't already exploited do it?

This may explain why black women today are conflicted when they think about Baartman.

Lesedi, from South Africa, highlighted this tension. "I feel you do find girls like me who are not proud of what they see when they look in the mirror and they just feel like, 'I need to drop this off'", she said. However she added that "you find other girls that are just so happy about it that they twerk. ... I guess Sarah Baartman definitely does have an influence, but it's either positive or negative whether you're proud to have a bum." **CT**

Rokeshia Renné Ashley is Assistant Professor of Communication, at Florida International University. This article was first published at www.theconversation.com.

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Photo: Paul Stafford for TravelMag.com

ALWAYS REMEMBERED: Beside the Plaza de la Revolucion, in Havana, Cuba, is this mural of revolutionary hero Che Guevara.

RICK SALUTIN

Haiti, Cuba, and the high price of independence

The fates of Haiti and Cuba, those just-next-door neighbours in the Caribbean, have been uniquely intertwined, like non-identical twins.

Haiti, a French colony, began its revolution in 1791, true to its

time. (The US in 1775, France in 1789.) It was Latin America's first war for independence, and also a slave revolt, the only victorious one historically. Napoleon launched a reinvasion but by 1804, Haiti had won. Then, as the father

in Maus says when he reaches the gates of Auschwitz, their troubles began.

The defeated colonial powers exacted a price. Britain didn't recognise Haiti till 1833, and the US not till 1862. France forced a repayment to former slaveowners on wretched terms dictated by Western banks. In 1900 that debt still absorbed 80 percent of Haitian GDP. It wasn't repaid till 1947! The US invaded in 1915 and stayed till 1934. It then oversaw a string of tyrants culminating in Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier, from 1957–1986.

Cuba, whose revolution didn't

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succeed until 1959, is the island nation that drew the lesson of the other island nation, Haiti. That lesson was: if you let your previous rulers (Spain, then the US) dictate your terms of “independence”, you will be immiserated and unfree. Its resolve to resist US control shows how fiercely it learned that lesson. Survival against US pressure may or may not be its greatest achievement, but it was the precondition for everything else.

Haiti, post the Docs (Papa and Baby) has been mired in economic, political and natural disasters. Its only real election, in 1991, was won by “liberation theology” priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide. A coup followed. US President Clinton restored Aristide in 1994, on the condition that Aristide buy into the humiliating neo-liberal agenda – for which Clinton later, in his uniquely screwed-up way, apologised. Aristide’s popularity suffered, but he won re-election in 2000 with over 91 percent of the vote. So in 2004 he was kidnapped by US forces and flown to exile in Africa.

It’s been horrendous since, a succession of kleptocrats and oligarchs, vetted and approved by the US with particular, despicable support from Canada that’s been admirably chronicled by a cadre of leftist Canadian critics.

In the current phase, there were intensified protests against controversial president Jovenel Moïse, who some argue clung to power illegally, backed by armed street gangs. He was assassinated last month by God knows who. (Perhaps the US also knows.) A



Photos: Wikimedia

Top: Jean-Bertrand Aristide – Deposed.
above: Former US President Bill Clinton
– Apologetic.

demeaning process of auditions and screening by the US et al followed, leading to a new illegitimate president. Even the head of Haiti’s senate, up to his ears in this stuff, said, “Haiti has become a baseball thrown between foreign diplomats”. Good choice of metaphor. Imperialism is the US national pastime.

Cuba, you might say, has in recent days had the same problem – dissent – but in a very different setting: relative success. Like its sheer longevity: despite a crippling US economic blockade, it has lasted as a one-party communist state, for only about a decade less than the

Soviet Union did. Health care and education have been impressive, including a COVID-19 vaccine, though production is hampered by the blockade. Its flaws are many, among them repression of dissent – including the unprecedented current rallies and marches. The government says all economic trouble is due to the blockade, and protests are down to US plots.

The brilliant, globally acclaimed novelist Leonardo Padura is not a communist, but is a patriot who’s chosen to remain in Cuba. He says he doesn’t doubt the role of the blockade or US agents. But there’s more to the dissent, surely, and even if there weren’t, there’s a deeper issue: “Cubans need to recover their hope and have a possible image of what their future can be”.

This is a matter peculiar to successful revolutions. They cannot coast, or lapse into defensiveness. They must renew periodically, or deteriorate lethally. Views will differ on what that means. In my opinion, it requires a free press, opposition parties and elections. Those in turn imply a potential end to “the revolution”.

One can imagine the Soviet Union’s last leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, watching from Moscow. He tried renewal there and it did fail. But what’s the alternative, if you want to avoid Stalinist brutalisation, or the final grotty years of the Soviet blob? **CT**

Rick Salutin writes about current affairs and politics. This column was first published in the Toronto Star.

TREVOR GRUNDY

Jamaica demands slave billions from UK

At a time when athletes take the knee, and when anyone with a sniff of a racist past is likely to find himself/herself jobless, a storm is gathering in Jamaica that could cost the British taxpayer billions of pounds.

Jamaica plans to ask Britain for billions in compensation for the way its ancestors suffered in the 17th-, 18th- and 19th-centuries when Britain was a key player in the slave trade.

Jamaica was a centre of the slave trade when it was first run by Catholic Spain, and then by Protestant Britain until the island's independence in 1962.

Olivia Grange, the UK's Minister of Sports, Youth, Culture said in an interview, "We are hoping for reparatory justice in all forms that one would expect if they are to really ensure that we get justice from injustice to repair the damage that our ancestors experienced".

Commonwealth sources say the question of British financial compensation to Jamaica and other countries would have been raised in Rwanda at the 2020 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). That meeting, and a rescheduled CHOGM in 2021, was not held because of the Covid pandemic.

But the issue of compensation has been delayed and not aban-



Slave in Chains or the Captive Slave, attributed to the artist John Simpson 1825-1830

done. "Redress is well overdue", said Grange.

Jamaica, with a population of three-million people, is an important part of the multiracial/multicultural Commonwealth whose head is Queen Elizabeth II.

An estimated 600,000 Africans were shipped to toil in Jamaica, according to the National Library of Jamaica. This is just a part of the 15-million people who the United Nations estimates were shackled and shipped to plantations in the New World.

The repatriations petition, with approval from Jamaica's National Council on Reparations, will go first to the attorney general and then to the Queen in London.

The petition is based on a private motion by the Jamaican lawmaker, Mike Henry, who said it was worth £7.6-billion, a sum he estimated roughly equivalent in today's terms to what Britain paid to the slave owners after the official abolition of slavery in 1807.

He added, "I am doing this because I have fought against this all my life, against chattel slavery which has dehumanised human life".

News about the Jamaican demands come as students at Oxford University say the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College would work wonders and improve race relations. But Jamaican politicians and legislators say that the exploitation of millions of non-white people cannot be laid at the door of a single man.

Millions of Britons right now live in towns and cities that owe part of their prosperity to the slave trade. Places such as London, Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow saw boom days on the back of slavery.

At its height in the 18th-century hundreds of thousands of ordinary people, including academics, politicians, Christian church leaders teachers and business people, had shares in the slave trade.

The petition also comes at a time when more and more people in Jamaica are demanding a formal break with Britain.

Last December opposition lawmaker Michael Phillips presented a

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motion to remove the British monarch as Jamaica's Head of State.

So far, the Foreign Office in London has ducked questions about Britain's response to demands for billions of pounds from just one of its former colonies. Will there be others? Who knows?

Britain prohibited the slave trade in 1807, partly thanks to the activities of men like the Christian Evangelist, William Wilberforce. But, of course, the existence of slavery didn't end there. In different forms it went on, and still does not only in Asia and Europe but also in Britain.

The British government in 1835 put aside the then astronomical sum of £20-million to deal with the problem.

But the money didn't go to the victims of slavery. It went to the slave owners. And Britain only ended paying off the ensuing interest payments in 2015.

At a time when academics, politicians, religious leaders and various anti-racist lobby groups are calling on the British government to decolonise the history curriculum, the fact that Britain paid £20-million to slave owners and not to the slaves is little known

In his book *Glimpses of a Global Life*, the former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Shridath Ramphal, praised the UK's *Independent on Sunday* newspaper (February 24, 2013) for publishing this little known fact in British schools and colleges

Ramphal said one of the beneficiaries of the £20-million payout was John Gladstone, father of the Liberal Party's William Gladstone. He received the equivalent of £83-million in today's money.

William Gladstone served four terms as British prime minister in the late 19th-century. He spoke in parliament against abolition in the

early part of his career, supporting his father's vast interest in British Guiana.

The grandchildren and great grandchildren of those who came to Britain in the 1950s want answers about who made money out of the slave trade and not just cost-free apologies from politicians

Meantime, we wait to hear where and when the next CHOGM will be held.

How the British public will react when it learns it has to pay billions of pounds because of a trade that took place so long ago and which they know so little about, remains to be seen. **CT**

Trevor Grundy is a British journalist who lived and worked in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa from 1966-1996. His website is www.trevorgrundy.news.

BOB LORD & SARAH ANDERSON

Sports teams? A lasting shelter for billionaires

Remember the Everlasting Gobstopper from Willie Wonka's chocolate factory? Designed for children "with very little pocket money", it lasted forever, never got smaller, and was perpetually flavourful.

There's a non-fiction equivalent, except it's only for billionaires. We call it the Everlasting Tax Shelter,

but it's more commonly known as a sports team.

ProPublica recently reported how it works: A billionaire buys a sports team (or an interest in one) and is allowed to claim income tax deductions for about 90 percent of the cost over the subsequent 15 years.

Using what's called an "amor-

tisation deduction", these owners get tax breaks for intangible assets like "goodwill" – such as a loyal fan base, good employee relations, and strong brand recognition.

Our tax code assumes these intangible assets decline in value in the same way that factory equipment depreciates, so owners can claim deductions for them for years.

But this isn't how sports teams work at all. In almost all cases, assets like the goodwill of fans get more valuable over time, not less, which drives the values of sports teams ever higher.

So, as teams are generating profits and growing more valuable,

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billionaire owners are claiming losses on their tax returns. This tax-dodging game works as long as they hold on to the investment, which most billionaire sports team owners do until death.

So it was with the late Save Mart Supermarkets mogul Robert Piccinini. He was a member of a group that purchased the Golden State Warriors in 2010 for a reported \$450-million. Over the following four years, ProPublica reports, he claimed losses of \$16-million – despite the fact that the team’s total value ballooned to \$1.3-billion during that period.

In 2015, Piccinini died, leaving his ownership interest to his children. Because he never sold his share in the team, Piccinini never had to pay income taxes on those paper losses.

His heirs didn’t have to either. Under a tax rule known as “stepped-up basis”, the heirs are treated as if they bought Piccinini’s interest in the limited liability company that owns the Warriors for its 2015 value, which had nearly tripled since Piccinini bought his stake in 2010.

It’s highly likely these heirs have also been enjoying huge tax breaks by claiming paper losses on their Warriors investment, even though the team is now reported to be worth \$4.7-billion – more than 10 times the 2010 purchase price.

No wonder Robert Piccinini’s son Dominic was in a jubilant mood when ESPN cameras caught him sipping from a golden chalice at a Warriors game in 2019.

Contacted by ProPublica, Do-

minic Piccinini acknowledged that he and his siblings had inherited equal shares of his father’s stake in the team, but he said he’s left the tax details to the family’s lawyers.

“It’s just the darnedest thing”, the younger Piccinini said in a phone call from a vacation in Mexico. “I’m a lucky son of a b—, there’s no way around it”.

Hard to disagree there.

President Biden’s tax plan would close the “stepped-up basis” loophole that allows the wealthy and

their children to escape taxes on their investment gains. Congress should pass the Biden plan – and also the amortisation deduction loophole. **CT**

Bob Lord is an Institute for Policy Studies associate fellow, is tax counsel to Americans for Tax Fairness. **Sarah Anderson** directs the Global Economy Project at the Institute for Policy Studies and co-edits *Inequality.org*. This op-ed was adapted from *Inequality.org* and distributed by *OtherWords.org*.

ADRIANNA CADENA

Getting out of poverty shouldn’t be about luck

I grew up in a poor, undocumented family. I was lucky – we got our legal residency, I got an education, and now I have a good job. But no one should have to count on luck.

Here’s my story and what I’ve learned.

My dad came to the US to work through the Bracero programme. He sent money to support us back in Mexico, but after 10 years apart, my family was desperate to reunite. So in the early 1980s, my mother took me, my sister, and brother across the border.

I was five years old, but I remember the heat, the exhaustion, the fear, and the hope. When we first reunited with my dad, he was living in a house with nine other



Adrianna Cadena

workers. For years, living with others was the only way we could make rent.

We put down roots in a conservative, majority-white town south of Dallas. At first, my parents were

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afraid to put us in school or even let us play outside – they feared we would be discovered and taken away. Eventually, we were enrolled in school, but the fear and trauma persisted. Neighbours called us “illegals,” “wetbacks,” and worse.

Money was tight. My dad worked hard at the local recycling center for less than \$200 a week. As a full-time babysitter, my mom just earned \$20 a week. We had beans and tortillas, a roof over our cramped living quarters, and that was it.

I remember my brother, a talented soccer player, once needed \$16 socks. Afterwards, food was scarce. So we kids went to work young. We barely got by, and we lived in constant fear of deportation.

Finally, in 1986, there was a legal amnesty programme for immigrants like us. My dad was afraid it was a trick to round us all up and deport us. Scams abounded where professional-looking people would try to charge immigrant families thousands of dollars to apply.

Poverty is like that sometimes. You work harder than you can imagine, and then you get fleeced. But eventually, we did become legal residents. It didn't mean we could now afford winter coats, but it did mean we weren't terrified everyday.

We worked very, very hard, but what really made a difference was luck. And that amnesty gave us just enough breathing room to get our family out of the shadows and out of poverty.

My good luck was that my school had a model Organization of American States programme. It turns out I was a natural for

diplomacy and ended up going to nationals in Washington, DC – an experience that helped me get into Georgetown.

School wasn't easy there, either – I was often treated like I wasn't good enough. But I graduated, moved back to Texas, and went to work for justice for immigrant families like mine.

I've learned a few things about poverty along the way.

First, the conditions for undocumented workers today are even worse now than when I was a child. Some things have improved with the new administration, but we still have private contractors locking up working people like my parents and kids like me. We desperately need meaningful immigration reform.

Second, I learned how cynical politicians use racial divisions to divide and conquer us.

Alongside my poor immigrant family lived poor Black families, literally on the other side of the railroad tracks, and poor white kids in a trailer park. We were all struggling. But instead of fighting the system that kept us in poverty, we were taught to fight each other.

I was lucky, but living a dignified life shouldn't depend on luck. Things like a living wage and a humane immigration policy need to be legislated according to standards of human rights and justice.

We're all better off when we're all better off. Let's go forward together. **CT**

Adriana Cadena is a human rights advocate at the Reform Immigration for Texas Alliance, a project of the Border Network for Human Rights, and a member of the Poor People's Campaign. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.

GEORGE MONBIOT

How the UK's rivers are being turned into sewers

What's remarkable is not that a UK water company knowingly and deliberately poured billions of litres of raw sewage into the sea to cut its costs. What's remarkable is that the Environment Agency investigated and prosecuted it. Every day, water companies pour tonnes of unprocessed filth into England's rivers and seas, and

the government does nothing.

Even in the wake of the sentence last week, under which Southern Water was fined £90-million, the company's own maps show a continued flow of raw filth into coastal waters. Same shit, different day. The only occasions on which water companies are allowed by law to release raw sewage are when “exceptional rainfall” overwhelms

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Photo: Billy Wilson / Flickr.com



Idyllic, but for how long? The River Wye at Haddon Hall, Bakewell, Derbyshire, England.

their treatment works. But the crap keeps coming, rain or no rain.

The prosecution, in this land of lions led by donkeys, was driven above all by one official at the Environment Agency, Stephen Bailey, who managed to stick with the case, breaking through layers of water industry deception and raising, within his organisation, a stink about the stink. Even so, though this was a deliberate and long-lasting crime, though “very serious widespread criminality” was established, though Southern Water obstructed the investigation, no executive is being prosecuted. The fine will be swallowed by its gigantic profits like a stone thrown into a settling tank.

As the court documents show, the company knew it ran the risk of big fines, but calculated that they would cost less than upgrading its plants and treating the sewage. Even now, this calculation may have been vindicated. Hiding its discharges saved it more than £90-million in penalties, even

before the huge savings it made by failing to upgrade its infrastructure are taken into account. So while the £90-million fine and the £126-million penalty imposed by the Water Services Regulation Authority, Ofwat, were heralded as “massive” and explained as “deterrents”, I don’t see them as either. The occasional prosecution, which holds an amorphous thing called the corporation – rather than any human being – liable, seems to be treated by water companies as a business cost.

The truth is that the governments of all four nations have lost control of the pollution crisis, and in some cases this seems to be, like Southern Water’s releases, knowing and deliberate. Since 2010, the Westminster government has cut the Environment Agency’s grant by almost two-thirds. It knew the budget was already stretched. It knew the water companies and other polluters were already getting away with murder, but it went ahead anyway. When you look into

your local river and see, instead of sparkling water and leaping fish, stools and wet wipes, sanitary towels and sewage fungus, please remember that this is what “cutting red tape” looks like.

Even worse, David Cameron’s administration shifted from external regulation to relying on water companies to “self-report” pollution incidents. In other words, the government depends on these ruthless, offshored corporations to blow the whistle on themselves. The Tories claim to be “tough”, “realistic”, and “businesslike”, but their willful naivety in expecting companies to regulate themselves would astonish a six-year-old.

Morale at the Environment Agency seems to have plunged even faster than its budget. Over the past few years, I’ve been contacted by whistleblowers telling similar stories: of having their hands tied behind their backs by the indifference or hostility of successive Tory governments. I’ve seen how a lack of grit on the part of the agency’s top brass, who raise public objections only in the mildest terms, has allowed the government to keep dumping on them.

Last month, the chief executive of the Environment Agency, Sir James Bevan, told a parliamentary inquiry that his organisation perceived “the overall performance of water companies is improving”, and “serious pollution incidents” were falling. A few minutes later, however, he admitted that “over time there are, exactly as you said, greater volumes and greater frequency of spillage”.

How can he reconcile these

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positions? Well, since 2016, according to answers it has sent me, the Environment Agency's monitoring budget has fallen by 5 percent. So it relies to an even greater extent on water company confessions. The Southern Water case revealed "very significant under-reporting" of its own malfeasance. Who would have guessed?

Despite repeated public complaints, it took the Environment Agency years to spot the tides of sewage on the south coast. Around the country, people keep stumbling across severe pollution that neither the Environment Agency nor the water companies claim to have noticed. As a paper in *Nature* shows, the evidence gaps are gigantic and the bias is all in one direction. "We're seeing less pollution" doesn't mean there's less pollution. It means there's less seeing.

Bevan also agreed that court actions against polluters fell by 98 percent between 2002 and 2020. Law enforcement has been dying as quickly as our rivers.

But this is not the worst of it, because water companies, reckless as they may be, astonishingly are not the country's biggest polluters. After a six-month investigation, with a team of independent filmmakers led by the director Franny Armstrong, we have broadcast the world's first live investigative documentary, *Rivercide**. This exposes an astonishing record of filth and failure, leading to the transformation of rivers across the UK, in just a few years, from thriving ecosystems to open sewers. Also livestreamed on YouTube, it identifies culprits and press for action.

Across the country, as monitoring, enforcement and prosecution have collapsed, local people are stepping up to fight the rising tide of filth. A national citizens' science project is building, as people around the country take samples and get them analysed, then demand change. But this is no vindication of Cameron's dream of a deregulated "big society". It's a sign of desperation. We love our rivers. We want to swim and paddle and feed the ducks and fish and boat without needing to worry about what's in the water. We do not consent to their use as cheap disposal chutes by ruthless corporations, exploiting the governments' regulatory failures. We do not consent to the tsunami of shit.

Our film is grounded in the same principles. It's crowdfunded, made with the help of volunteers, using citizen science to fill reporting gaps. If change is going to happen, it won't come from the centre. It will come from the margins.

We are no substitute for government, as we have no powers. But we can expose the neglect of those who claim to lead us, and demand that the law is upheld. They might be happy to wallow in filth. We're not. **CT**

*George Monbiot is a columnist for the Guardian, where this article first appeared. His website is www.monbiot.com. You can watch the livestream of *Rivercide* at www.rivercide.tv*

CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

The 'harm-reduction president' keeps killing

Boy this US-led world order sure is working out great. This was definitely worth killing millions of people in imperialist wars for.

The "harm reduction" president just bombed Afghanistan and Somalia and added further sanctions to Cuba.

The cool thing about having a US president with obvious dementia symptoms is it makes it clear that the administration is running inde-

pendent of his authority, which is like training wheels for the reality that all administrations are run independent of any president's authority.

"Hmm, it turns out a presidential administration can run fine even if the president has a degenerative neurological disease. Perhaps the presidency isn't as important as advertised. Perhaps the most powerful government in the world isn't being run by its elected officials at all".

If the president were in charge then the presidency which cam-

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paigned as the anti-Trump wouldn't be continuing all of the Trump administration policies that powerful people care about. Yet it is.

If Kamala takes over for Joe, all that will change is the US will go from having a fake puppet president with dementia to having a fake puppet president who doesn't have dementia.

"It's not dementia, Biden has a speech impediment! A speech impediment which causes a rapidly exacerbating shift in personality and demeanour and ability to organize thoughts over a period of several years!"

While everyone's fighting to make sure all American schools teach kids that slavery was bad and the KKK is immoral, perhaps you could get them teaching kids that murdering millions of people in other countries for power and profit is also not good.

Basically what happened was 100 years ago some communists overthrew the Russian Empire, and then the entire worldwide capitalist class spent the next century inventing propaganda and surveillance systems and robot and drone technologies to help make sure that can never happen to them.

Me: We need to end the system which destroys our environment for profit and leads to widespread mass murder and injustice and world-threatening nuclear escalations because if we don't everyone will die.

Army of weird idiots: You just don't understand economics, bruh

I go on binges of focusing on China

a lot because the success of the imperialist propaganda campaign against Beijing honestly freaks me the fuck out. It's really, really creepy watching more and more people's minds fold and transform into tools of the Pentagon in real time. It's like watching a zombie outbreak.

A big part of the problem is that just as the insane don't know they're insane, the propagandised don't know they're propagandised. Criticise all the anti-China propaganda that's going around and people say, "Why are you defending a government that wants to take over the world and harvest my organs and give me a social credit score?"

And they think that's normal. They have no idea their mind has

been hijacked and made into a tool of cold warriors and the military-industrial complex; they think they're defending an objective reality. This is a major challenge, because nobody's going to remove a blindfold if they don't believe it exists.

The last secretary of state openly admitted the US is sanctioning Iran into the Stone Age so that the people will get so miserable they rise up against their government, and yet when protests happen in Iran due to shortages caused by sanctions there are still people who buy it. **CT**

Caitlin Johnstone is an Australian blogger. Her website is www.caitlinjohnstone.com

HURWITT'S EYE

MARK HURWITT



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