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## Articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yuval Levin</td>
<td>Congress Is Weak Because Its Members Want It to Be Weak</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There's a constitutional crisis, but it's not the one you think.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie Phillips</td>
<td>Time to Leave?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The question that the Jews of Britain and Europe must ponder.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sohrab Ahmari</td>
<td>Game of Peacock Thrones</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The days of the Islamic Republic of Iran may be drawing to a close.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What next?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam J. White</td>
<td>Cake Boss</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Justice Anthony Kennedy's jurisprudence of dignity came full circle.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Pethokoukis</td>
<td>The Great American Melt-Up</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No, we're not stagnated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth R. Wisse</td>
<td>The Exuberant Joylessness of Philip Roth</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The brilliant and problematic work of a Jewish writer who didn't want to be one.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ardie Goldman</td>
<td>How to Combat the Left’s ‘Alternative’ Israel Brainwashing</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My time among the propagandists.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah Brown</td>
<td>How Israel Became a Television Powerhouse</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The unlikely rise of a pop-culture leader.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Politics & Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin D. Williamson</td>
<td>The Assault on Nonprofit Rights</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Liberal Suppression,</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>By Philip Hamburger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Politics & Ideas

**Tod Lindberg**  
**Measure for Measure**  
*The Tyranny of Metrics,*  
By Jerry Z. Muller  
66

**Elliot Kaufman**  
**Dear Evan Palestinian**  
*Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor,*  
By Yossi Klein Halevi  
67

**Ben Cohen**  
**The Middle East’s Other Refugees**  
*Uprooted,*  
By Lyn Julius  
69

**Jonathan Silver**  
**Three Wise Men**  
*Racing Against History,*  
By Rick Richman  
70

## Culture & Civilization

**Terry Teachout**  
**McDonagh at High Ebbing**  
A writer-director's profound meditations on violence.  
73

**Edward Kosner**  
**Here Comes Whinin’ Simon**  
*Paul Simon: The Life*  
By Robert Hilburn  
76

## Monthly Commentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4</th>
<th>Reader Commentary Letters on the May issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Social Commentary Christine Rosen The Suicide Epidemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Washington Commentary Andrew Ferguson Where We're Going, We Don't Need Rhodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Jewish Commentary Meir Y. Soloveichik Why Christians are Reading the Rav</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Media Commentary Matthew Continetti Bill Clinton, Rageaholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*Silver*
To the Editor:

NOAH C. ROTHMAN’S article about our politics of despair presents a number of points worthy of serious conversation (“The Fatalist Conceit,” May). One, however, requires immediate comment. Our legislators can actually effect social change dramatically, but not necessarily through policy. That is, they can comport themselves in such a way that sets a positive example, both as individuals and members of legislative bodies. In truth, the list of U.S. senators and representatives worthy of emulation in this way falls far short of 535 names.

Burt Floraday
Michigan City, Indiana

Un fortunately, progressives have remodeled the country culturally and they remain, as Noah C. Rothman notes, miserable. Worse still, their “success” has significantly diminished the American spirit and imperiled our free republic. The psychological burden on liberals in the age of Donald Trump is due in part to their having to reckon with their skullduggery. Why did the eight years of a Barack Obama presidency, “commanding presence” and all, result in higher poverty rates in minority communities, low economic growth, increased identity-based divisions, and declining respect for America across the globe? In short, because the liberal collectivist has always respected power more than he respects the individual. Covering that up has required a great capacity for deception.

Philip Melita
Charlottesville, Virginia

Noah C. Rothman writes:

While I agree with Burt Floraday that “the list of U.S. senators and representatives worthy of emulation in this way falls far short of 535 names,” the list is still mighty long. I would venture that the majority of those who go into government do so for the right reasons. They are respected members of their communities, people of character with stable family lives and a desire to effect positive change—even if that desire sometimes conflicts with political conditions that demand compromises of character and ideology. But personal conduct is not governance. Barack Obama is a devoted father and husband. And he frequently worked to exacerbate divisive culture wars. He also spent six of his eight years in the Oval Office building a legacy based on pen strokes, many of which have been undone by his successor. Mistaking the power of personality for governance is a grave error. And when that mistaken impression is shattered, you end up like Ben Rhodes on election night: stammering and crestfallen on the steps of the Jacob
Javits Center, betrayed by the country you no longer recognize. But the country didn’t betray Rhodes; he was betrayed by a tempting misconception about what politics is and what it can achieve.

I agree with Philip Melita that liberals are predisposed to value communitarianism above atomization, but that alone does not explain their misery. If it did, why would conservatives share it? Those on the right, too, are inclined toward pessimism because they have, in my view, bought in to the self-deception inherent in the notion that America can be remade from the top down. Conservatives are disinclined to reflect on the declining abortion rate, which is the lowest it has been since Roe v. Wade. They put little stock in the fact that most states are now “right-to-work,” and the power of organized labor has reached a historic nadir. They don’t see the extent to which they have won the argument when it comes to the right of individuals to localize education curricula and provide parents with the right to choose where their children receive an education. They fail to note how effective they’ve been in arguing against the inherent flaws associated with the progressive regulation of major financial institutions. Nor did they take any pleasure in the efforts of a Republican-led Congress to block the passage of significant legislation from 2011 to 2017, or in the revival of originalism on the bench, which has led to the relaxation of restrictions on firearms ownership and free expression in a way the country hasn’t seen in almost a century. Some of these trends are about government. Some are related to culture. These things occasionally intersect, but they are not synonymous.
To the Editor:

RABBI Meir Y. Soloveichik poignantly observes that the Jewish people's miraculous, history-defying rebirth from the ashes of the Holocaust proves the existence of G-d (“The Miracle at 70,” May). All Jews in Israel, secular as well as religious, experience the power of that miracle every spring, as the yearly gut-wrenching observance of Memorial Day for Israel’s fallen abruptly transitions into the joyful celebrations of Israel’s Independence Day. Yet G-d’s intervention in Jewish history is more than evidence of his existence; it should be perceived, at least by religious Jews, as a clarion call to rise up from the Diaspora and make aliyah.

Davide Matar
Efrat, Israel

To the Editor:

IN WRITING about Israel at 70, Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik makes a convincing case that the Jewish state's survival is the result of transcendent, rather than worldly, causes. I take exception, however, to his framing of the miraculous. Rabbi Soloveichik writes: “The definition of a miracle is an event that should not naturally have occurred.” Theorizing about the violation of nature's laws appeals to the superstitious and magical drives of our lower selves. Conversely, defining the word miracle as a natural occurrence that inspires faith appeals to our higher selves. Perhaps part of the reason that people reject religion is that in its most literal sense it violates reason, fact, and science.

Allen Weingarten
Monroe Township, New Jersey

To the Editor:

RABBI Meir Y. Soloveichik's otherwise compelling column on the modern-day miracle of Israel contained an assertion that doesn't square with the historical record, namely that Stalin's anti-Semitism rivaled Hitler's. Indeed, Rabbi Soloveichik undermines his own claim by citing examples of Stalin's pro-Israel actions, including his support of partition and allowance of Czechoslovakia’s sale of planes and arms to the fledgling Jewish state.

Although these and other actions taken under Stalin's watch indicated a sometimes sympathetic attitude toward Jews, there is of course no question that Stalin was an anti-Semite. This is evidenced by his banishment of Jews to Siberia and other far-flung regions of the Soviet Union and later by his murdering Yiddish writers and artists, his destruction of Yiddish culture, and his roundup of Jewish doctors. But to equate his anti-Semitism to Hitler's? Unlike Stalin, Hitler never exhibited any sympathy whatsoever toward Jews. And while Hitler banned Jews from serving in the German armed forces, Stalin not only allowed them in his military, but also permitted many to be promoted to high officer rank. Moreover, whereas Stalin's anti-Semitism was not unlike that of certain Russian czars who preceded him, Hitler's eliminationist, genocidal anti-Semitism had no precedent in history. When Hitler spoke of transporting Jews to the East, it was a euphemism for their outright murder in death camps. In contrast, although many Jews did not survive the harsh conditions of Siberia, Stalin's transporting of Jews to the East actually saved those who did survive from near certain death at the hands of the Nazis. Indeed, Stalin's eventual release of them from Siberia after World War II enabled many to make their way to Palestine.

Jerry Stern
Merion Station, Pennsylvania

On Pope Francis

To the Editor:

AFTER READING Sohrab Ahmari’s review of Ross Douthat’s book, I’m compelled to say that the pope has brought a much-needed breath of fresh air to the problem of a divided Church (“The Catholic Crisis,” May). The conflicts brought about from Vatican II do in fact represent a duality (rigidity versus relativism), and the papacy of Francis is an opportunity to bring in a new era of reconciliation.

Eric Cadow
Houston, Texas

To the Editor:

THERE ARE TWO POINTS to make regarding Sohrab Ahmari’s review of To Change the Church. First, anyone who supports Pope Francis must look at the poor job he’s doing concerning the abuse crisis in the Church, something that has done immense harm to so many. He’s offered his mea culpa over the Chilean problem, but this sheds no

Israel’s 70th
light on the situation concerning Cardinal Maradiaga and Bishop Juan José Pineda of Honduras. Both Maradiaga and Pineda are under serious scrutiny by the Honduran government and the Church regarding accusations of sexual misconduct. What’s more, Maradiaga is one of the nine advisers from the College of Cardinals and one of Francis’s closest confidants.

Second, the whole left-center/conservative issue will remain in flux. I have a prediction: Francis will find a way to nullify *Humanae Vitae*. Francis has already declared that the Church must listen to the young—because the young Catholics support Francis. Prepare for a further blows to tradition. Ross Douthat is an able journalist and obviously is trying to urge the Church to muddle through. I fear, however, that Pope Francis poses a much more serious threat to 2,000 years of Catholicism than the many “cautious optimists” want to believe.

Eric Bergerud
Albany, California

Sohrab Ahmari writes:
I DISAGREE with how Eric Cadow frames the Church’s post-Vatican II debates: “rigidity versus relativism,” with “reconciliation” offered as the middle way—or solution—that would move the Church beyond this opposition. The Catholic Church can never compromise with relativism or accept a little of it in order to avoid the counter-pole of rigidity. But if it came down to it, I would take holy rigidity over relativism any day. Having said that, post-conciliar reconciliation in the Church is a worthy goal, indeed essential. But reconciliation shouldn’t be opposed to moral truth. Indeed, truth is the condition of genuine reconciliation, insofar as reconciliation is an act of love or charity. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, “Only in truth does charity shine forth, only in truth can charity be authentically lived” (emphasis in original).

Pope Francis himself has admitted to having made missteps in the Chilean case, so Eric Bergerud will meet no resistance from me on that front. As for *Humanae Vitae*, however, I don’t share Mr. Bergerud’s bleak view. The “Francis effect” has yet to extend to the dignity-of-life questions implicated in *Humanae Vitae* (Pope Paul VI’s encyclical reaffirming the Church’s opposition to artificial contraception). On the contrary, the pope offered a powerful counter-witness to the culture of death during the recent Alfie Evans controversy in Britain. Even on the divorce-and-remarriage question, Pope Francis has yet to make explicitly, as an exercise of his teaching authority, any of the claims his liberal admirers ascribe to him. I hope Mr. Bergerud will join me in praying that the pope goes no further than this troubling ambiguity.
The Suicide Epidemic

CHRISTINE ROSEN

The recent suicides of fashion entrepreneur Kate Spade and chef-turned-TV-star Anthony Bourdain have sparked a culture-wide discussion, as often happens when a celebrity dies in a horrible fashion. But unlike previous celebrity suicides, the anxieties prompted by these deaths took on a different coloration when it became clear in their wake that their deaths are part of a larger and disturbing public-health crisis we’ve failed to acknowledge.

According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is now the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S., killing twice as many people (45,000) as homicide does each year. In more than 25 states across the country, the suicide rate has increased by more than 30 percent since 1999.

Most of the deaths are people (like Spade and Bourdain) at an age once considered the prime of life, which suggests a kind of epic, deadly new form of the midlife crisis: The largest number of suicides are happening among white men and white women between the ages of 45 and 65 (although rates are rising steadily for nearly all racial and ethnic groups). The news is grimmest for men, who account for three-quarters of all suicides. The CDC’s principal deputy director, Anne Schuchat, told Business Insider that the new data are “disturbing.”

Disturbing and confusing. Suicide has often increased during times of economic hardship; in 1932, during the height of the Great Depression, for example, the rate was 22 deaths per 100,000 people, according to the New York Times. But in the U.S. today, during an economic recovery under way for nearly a decade, the rate is 15.4 per 100,000. And the number of deaths has stubbornly increased despite much better screening and mental-health diagnosis. As the CDC researchers who worked on the recent report noted, “More than half of people who died by suicide did not have a known diagnosed mental health condition at the time of death.” Rather, the researchers listed substance abuse, job loss, relationship problems, and financial woes as some of the many factors potentially implicated in rising suicide rates.

How did suicide, a disease of despair, a last resort, become a solution to the challenges of everyday life for so many people?

The sociologist Émile Durkheim was one of the first people to posit that suicide could be understood culturally and socially, not just as the expression of an individual’s state of mind. His 1897 book, Suicide, noted the myriad and often contradictory ways that cultures had come to understand suicide throughout history (heroic, tragic, noble, a mortal sin), and it identified a typology of suicides. Anomic suicides, he argued, were associated with periods of social and economic upheaval. Altruistic suicides had some connection to commitments to a larger cause (such as soldiers sent on suicide missions during wartime). Fatalist suicide tempted people, such as prisoners, who were left without hope. But it is Durkheim’s egoistic type...
that has resonance for our current epidemic. Egoistic suicides occur more often in highly individualistic cultures where people feel detached or isolated from society and when social and community ties are weak rather than strong. These are people who no longer feel they belong in society, have few people who can reassure them otherwise, and thus can’t summon a reason to live.

Despite our highly virtually connected society, with its thriving online communities and emphasis on likes and retweets, it’s easy to overlook the widening gulf between the popular images and culture we consume and our private lives, between the images on the screen and the often lonely reality behind closed doors. The New York Times recently reported that in 2005, seven years after pop culture began celebrating the liberated single women in Sex and the City, “single middle-aged women were as much as 2.8 times more likely to kill themselves than married women” (and single men were 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide than married men). Add to that the heavily filtered, seemingly perfect lives posted on Instagram, and the reality of struggling with loneliness or failure, to say nothing of depression, can seem impossible to accept.

This is not a new problem, of course, nor is our eagerness to ignore it. In Philip Slater’s 1970 polemic, The Pursuit of Loneliness, he noted, “The hunger for confrontation and experience draws a lot of attention to social problems, but these are usually dealt with in such a way as to reinforce our avoidance. The ultimate effect of the media is to reinforce the avoiding response by providing people with an effigy of confrontation.”

Today, we construct such effigies after every celebrity death, and particularly for suicides. Media coverage provides details of the methods employed and parses the last words and final moments of the dead, even though mental-health experts have long warned that this can contribute to suicidal ideation in vulnerable people and inspire copycat suicides. We encourage greater candor about mental-health issues and have more resources available for those who suffer. But there is also more information available online about how to commit suicide.

We now encourage greater candor about mental-health issues and have more resources available for those who suffer. But there is also more information available online about how to commit suicide.

Duration

Measurable spike in suicides after Robin Williams took his own life in 2014, for example. Some news outlets reported that Kate Spade had spent hours poring over the details of Williams’s methods before deciding to end her own life in the same way.

At the same time, the taboo against suicide has weakened considerably in recent years. Right-to-die legislation has passed in six states and the District of Columbia. As Rutgers sociologist Julie Phillips told the New York Times, “we are seeing somewhat more tolerant attitudes toward suicide,” especially among the young, who respond in surveys that they believe “we have the right to die under certain circumstances, like incurable disease, bankruptcy, or being tired of living.” Pop culture reflects this in movies and television shows that celebrate the heroism of those who choose to die when their lives appear no longer worth living (Million Dollar Baby); some of these shows, such as Netflix’s 13 Reasons Why, are aimed explicitly at younger viewers.

Durkheim noted that in highly individualistic cultures, insatiable desires created a great deal of human misery, but that families and communities could serve as reliable curbs on such desires. Likewise, CDC researchers who study suicide mention “connectedness” as one of the major ways to prevent future suicides. But as our virtual communities have expanded, in-person networks (and our interactions with extended families and friends) have eroded. Virtual networks cannot perform the same functions as face-to-face connections. It’s far easier to ignore a Facebook message or an email from a friend than it is to avoid a knock at your front door. And yet in a short span of time, we’ve become habituated to the former kind of “connection” and dismissive of the latter.

Albert Camus began The Myth of Sisyphus with the following observation: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” Such deaths were “facts the heart can feel,” Camus noted. Too many Americans are deciding that life is not worth living. The question is whether we will simply accept that this is the inevitable price we pay for a hyper-individualistic, on-demand, atomized, technologically proficient yet disconnected society—or if the horrifying facts about suicide cause us to try to change the way we live now.
Where We’re Going, We Don’t Need Rhodes

ANDREW FERGUSON

FOR TWO YEARS NOW I’ve been trying to persuade myself that I could at least pretend to have a soft spot in my iron-clad heart for Ben Rhodes, the Obama foreign-policy adviser whose new memoir, The World As It Is, has lately been making noise. My struggle began in 2016, when the New York Times Magazine ran a profile of him. It provoked a considerable commotion. Everyone agreed that the article presented Rhodes, still in his mid-thirties, as a glib, self-aggrandizing twit, but that’s not why I wanted to like him.

His observations scandalized professional Washingtonians, and that made me feel the warm glow of intellectual kinship. Rhodes, according to the author of the profile, had “a healthy contempt for the American foreign-policy establishment, including editors and reporters at the New York Times, the Washington Post, the New Yorker, and elsewhere.” Rhodes called this establishment the Blob, and among its stalwarts he named Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates. Even better, Rhodes turned his attention to the Washington press corps, which he described as easily manipulated—by him. “The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old,” Rhodes said. “And their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns. That’s a sea change. They literally know nothing.”

Reading this one Sunday morning with the Times scattered on the floor around me, I could barely stifle a cry: Ben! My Man! What’s not to like? Rhodes’s description of the working press in Washington, particularly those bright young things who flutter around partisan politics and the White House, is perfectly accurate. And anyone who has tried to catch 40 winks at a Brookings Institution foreign-policy panel or taken up a machete to hack through the tangled prose of Foreign Affairs will think the “Blob” is not only an accurate tag but maybe too kind.

I kept struggling to nurse a sympathy for Rhodes through the release this January of The Final Year, an HBO documentary that shadowed the deputy national-security adviser through his last months thinking up American foreign policy. The film showed him to be even glibber and more self-aggrandizing than the Times had let on; a bully, too. Nevertheless, his colleagues, such as UN Ambassador Samantha Power and his proximate boss, Susan Rice, were happy to help in the aggrandizing. Not only was Rhodes brilliant, said Rice, he had achieved a “mind meld” with Obama, as if he were a Vulcan beamed in to do a job on Captain Kirk. (Bad casting: Obama's the one with the funny ears.) In the movie, Rhodes wears a perpetual scowl.

Andrew Ferguson is a senior editor of the Weekly Standard and the author of Crazy U and Land of Lincoln.
This is perhaps a sign of stress—in his new book, he says he got nervous before his first meeting with Obama in 2007 and stayed nervous for 10 years—or he might worry that if he smiled his forehead would split open and all those brains would spill out, his and Obama's.

*The World As It Is* confirms that it was right to cling to my sympathy, for Rhodes comes off, despite himself, as a woebegone character. He's unappealing for all the familiar reasons, but as a powerful White House aide, he's also feckless and overwhelmed, deploying his famous arrogance and bullying tactics as little floaties to keep his head above water. Sentence for sentence, he's not much of a writer, which is to be expected from an author with an MFA in creative writing. Altogether, though, he draws a compelling picture of an entire swath of his class and generation. They are the twenty- and thirtysomethings who manned the Obama administration and expect soon to be our ruling class—well-to-do and mostly white, energetic and ambitious and entitled, with fancy degrees that left them with many poses and attitudes but little knowledge of the country that popped the silver spoon into their mouths.

His artlessness is touching, almost. He and his bride, Rhodes writes, are too busy with their careers to spare time for a honeymoon, so they throw one hell of a wedding bash. (“At the end of the night, Samantha Power was carried dramatically out of the wedding party by her husband.”) Ben grabs the mike from the DJ and belts a George Michael song. With all his peers in attendance, he sees it as the end of something but also the beginning:

> It felt like the period on a stretch of time when we all hadn't quite been promoted to positions of higher responsibility—before people took over departments of government, joined the cabinet, had kids, got divorced, succeeded in (or failed out of) government, or went off to make money.

*Went off to make money.* This is an apt description of one of the many options awaiting Rhodes and his friends, but it sounds like a phrase from another era—you think of old WASPs from Brown and Harrierman setting up their sons on Wall Street after they got back from the war. It's only with a jolt that you realize an entire set of cultural assumptions and behavior—in particular, the unquestioning sense of their own indispensability—has been transplanted from that long-gone generation of fogeys to the best’n’brightest of the 21st century.

Not all the assumptions and behavior, of course. George Marshall did not sing glam rock at his own wedding, for example. And Rhodes indulges in, and readily confesses to, unhealthy doses of self-pity. One year into the White House, he laments that the president has taken him to Hawaii for the holidays. “I walked through groups of people on the beach,” he writes, “away from friends and family for the first time in my life.” Dean Acheson may have felt humiliated that his terrible inaugural seats embarrassed him in front of his out-of-town family, but unlike Rhodes, he kept it to himself. After the *Times* profile, Ben wrestles with questions of identity: “You live your life knowing that the story out there about who you are is different from the person you think you are, and want to be.” (Don’t waste too much time on it.)

Rhodes’s oversharing is common to his generation and class, as are the self-absorption and self-regard it’s a token of. In the self-regard, if not the emotional incontinence, he resembled the president he served. Obama here is the Obama we’ve been hearing about for a decade now: even-tempered and frosty as dry ice, with a confidence in his own wisdom and destiny, packaged in high-flown statements that are either gnomic or banal. They do succeed in stoking the admiration of his easily impressed followers. He summarizes his theory of speechmaking to Rhodes, who’s wowed: “We are telling a story about who we are.” Rhodes twice repeats a favorite saying that his leader apparently once heard from Carl Sagan on TV—“There are more stars in the sky than grains of sand on the earth”—though nobody but Obama knows what it applies to. The president reflects on leadership. “The American people are idealists,” Obama tells Rhodes, “but their leaders have to be realistic and hard-headed.” Why, back at the University of Chicago, that there's what they call a paradox.

Hard-headedness is not the quality that most distinguished the foreign policy Ben Rhodes helped shape. His book appears just as the signal attainments of Obama’s administration are being dismantled, with great clumsiness but also, as these things go, almost certain finality. This only adds to the poignancy. Rhodes continues to see the Trump ascendency as an aberration and not as the national upchuck it was, the revulsion a large part of the country felt toward the administration—to the class—he typifies. *The World As It Is* is a good book, an insider account of those who would be kings (and queens). I put it aside with admiration, and also with a paraphrase from Rhodes himself: They literally learned nothing.
IN 2015, I was invited to a conference held at a Catholic University in Spain, celebrating the first Spanish translation of The Lonely Man of Faith, the seminal philosophical essay of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (my great uncle), reverently referred to by many Orthodox Jews as “the Rav.” Published 50 years earlier, the essay contrasts two biblical accounts of the creation of man and teases out two personas, known as Adam the First and Adam the Second. In the first chapter of Genesis, humanity is created in the image of God and instructed by the Almighty to “fill the world and subdue it.” Adam the First, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, is majestic; through his God-like creative capacities he seeks scientific breakthroughs, to cure disease, to build cities and countries, to advance the health and comfort of mankind.

But then there is Adam the Second, who in Genesis 2 is created from the dust of the earth and remains in the sanctity of the garden of Eden, “to work and protect it.” This represents the religious aspect of man, man who is ever aware of his finitude, who finds fulfillment not in majestic achievement but in an intimate relationship with a personal God.

These two accounts are given, Rabbi Soloveitchik argued, because both are accurate; both Adam I and Adam II are divinely desired aspects of the human experience. One who is devoted to religious endeavors is reminded that “he is also wanted and needed in another community, the cosmic-majestic,” and when one works on behalf of civilization, the Bible does not let him forget “that he is a covenantal being who will never find self-fulfillment outside of the covenant.” The man of faith is not fully of the world, but neither can he reject the world. To join the two parts of the self may not be fully achievable, but it must nevertheless be our goal.

In his letter of invitation to the conference, the president of the Spanish university reflected on how Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writings spoke to his own vocation. As a leader of a Christian school, he said he grappled constantly with the challenge of being an hombre de fe in a Europe that, once the cradle of Christendom, was now suddenly secular:

As Adam the First understandably and correctly busies himself with the temporal concerns of this world, we encourage our students to not lose sight, within their own hearts, of Adam the Second, the thirsting Adam that...
longs for a redemption that our technological advances cannot quench. We hope that our students, who come to our university seeking degree titles that will translate into jobs, will leave it also with awakened minds and hearts that fully recognize the deep aspirations that lie within their youthful spirits, and which The Lonely Man of Faith so eloquently describes.

The letter reflected a fascinating phenomenon. As Orthodox Jews mark this year the 25th anniversary of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s passing, more and more of his works are being studied, savored, appreciated, and applied to people’s own lives—by Christians. As interesting as this is, it should not be surprising. The Lonely Man of Faith actually originated, in part, in a talk to Catholic seminarians, and today it is Christians who are particularly shocked by the rapidity with which a culture that was once Christian has turned on them, so that now people of faith are quite lonely in the world at large. In his essay, Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that though the tension between Adam I and Adam II is always a source of angst, “the contemporary man of faith is, due to his peculiar position in secular society, lonely in a special way,” as our age is “technically minded, self-centered, and self-loving, almost in a sickly narcissistic fashion, scoring honor upon honor, piling up victory upon victory, reaching for the distant galaxies, and seeing in the here-and-now sensible world the only manifestation of being.”

Now that the world of Adam I seems wholly divorced from that of Adam II, people of faith seek guidance in the art of bridging the two; and if, 70 years ago, Reinhold Niebhur was a theologian who spoke for a culture where Christianity was the norm, Rabbi Soloveitchik is a philosopher for Jews and Christians who are outsiders. The Catholic philosopher R.J. Snell, in a Christian reflection inspired by the Rav’s writings, wrote that “like Joseph B. Soloveitchik in The Lonely Man of Faith, I am lonely,” and he tells us why:

In science, my faith is judged obscurantist; in ethics, mere animus; in practicality, irrelevant; in love, archaic. In the square, I am silenced; at school, mocked; in business, fined; at entertainment, derided; in the home, patronized; at work, muffled. My leaders are disrespected; my founder blasphemed by the new culture, new religion, and new philosophy which...suffers from an aversion to the fullness of questions, insisting that questions are meaningful only when limited to a scope much narrower than my catholic range of wonder.

Yet Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thesis remains that even when society rejects us, we cannot give up on society, but we also cannot amputate our religious identity from our very selves. Adam I and Adam II must be bridged. This will not be easy, but a theme throughout Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writings is that all too often religion is seen as a blissful escape from life’s crises, while in truth the opposite is the case. In the words of Reuven Ziegler, Rabbi Soloveitchik insisted that “religion does not offer an escape from reality, but rather provides the ultimate encounter with reality.” Traditional Jews and Christians in the West face cultural challenges to their faith—disdain, scorn, and even hate—but if the challenge is faced with fortitude, sophistication, and honor, it will be a religious endeavor worthy of being remembered.

And as both traditional Jews and Christians face this challenge, it will often be as compatriots, in a fellowship that we may not have foreseen 50 years ago. After attending the conference, I was emailed by another member of the administration, the rector of the university. He thanked me “for the pleasure of sharing that deep friendship which is a sign of the community inspired by the principles of the second Adam,” and added, “[I] really enjoyed the time we passed together and the reading of the book of Rabbi Soloveitchik,” which was, he reflected, “so stimulating for a better understanding of my own life and my faith.” To be a person of faith is indeed to be lonely in this world. But more and more, lonely men and women of several faiths may be brought together by The Lonely Man of Faith.
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Congress Is Weak Because Its Members Want It to Be Weak

There’s a constitutional crisis, but it’s not the one you think

By Yuval Levin

If you follow politics in America today, you probably spend most of your time gawking at the president. It is hard to avoid attributing every dysfunction of the moment to Donald Trump’s peculiar mix of reckless talk and often feckless action.

But judged on a scale of institutional breakdown, the presidency—even this presidency—is not our biggest problem. No, the failures of the Congress both run deeper and are harder to explain. They begin with a simple inability to get much accomplished. Republicans have controlled both Houses of Congress since 2014 and since 2017 have had a president willing to sign more or less anything they send him, but they have mostly been spinning their wheels in frustration.

They pat themselves on the back for cutting the corporate tax rate, a reform that has had bipartisan support for most of this century yet barely happened. And they praise themselves for confirming judges, an act that requires only a simple Senate majority now. But that’s about the sum of it.

They are less inclined now to talk about healthcare reform, which was the foremost plank of every Republican platform since 2010 but fell apart last year and seems to have been abandoned. Presidential priorities such as immigration and infrastructure are going nowhere. The same can be said of longstanding Republican priorities such as entitlement reform.

The budget process has never been so hobbled. Not only did we come close to an unprecedented government shutdown during single-party control of Congress and the presidency, but this year has also marked the first time in the four-plus decades since the modern budget process was created that neither chamber has even considered a budget resolution.

And the trouble didn’t start in just the past few years. Presidential hyperactivity in recent decades has

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Commentary
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masked a rising tide of dysfunction—giving us policy action to observe and debate while obscuring the disorder that was overtaking our core constitutional infrastructure. It kept us from facing what should be an unavoidable fact: Congress is broken.

So whether you measure it by legislation, public approval, member satisfaction, even just committee work or each house's ability to live by its own rules and procedures, the institution looks awfully dysfunctional. And the primary reason for that dysfunction may be the worst news of all: Congress is weak because its members want it to be. And that means the structure of our system, the insights of its framers, and the incentives that shape our politics don't offer obvious solutions.

The Constitution gives the Congress powers but not responsibilities. The president is required to execute the laws and tasked with responding to changing world events on the country's behalf. The courts have to consider cases and controversies put before them and apply the laws accordingly. But while the general scope and reach of the Congress's authorities are laid out in Article I, the institution is not really told what it must do within that scope. That's because the assumption was that Congress would naturally seek to control things and run as far and as hard in pursuit of power as the Constitution allowed, so that only boundaries were needed.

James Madison believed the legislative branch of government would exhibit an unquenchable ambition. As he wrote in Federalist 48, it would always be “extending the sphere of its activity, and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex.” In Federalist 51, Madison offers this as the reason for the bicameral legislature: “In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates. The remedy for this inconveniency is to divide the legislature into different branches.”

The legislative branch would be so dominant because the intense ambition of its members couldn't really be contained. Those members would speak most directly for the public, and their jobs could not be bounded by the laws as the job of a judge and a president can be. They would have the power to make the laws, after all, and so would be the moving force in our regime, strving incessantly to act.

Today’s Congress simply defies that expectation. It suffers from a malady the framers never quite imagined when they thought about politics: a shortage of ambition. Members are certainly eager to retain their offices, but they seem oddly indifferent to using those offices.

For example: About half a year from an election that could plausibly end their unified control of Congress for a while, congressional Republicans appear to have decided to spend this time doing essentially nothing. Even if bipartisan agreement is too hard to achieve, they have the opportunity, using the budget-reconciliation process, to take on serious legislative work with bare majorities. And they have a president eager to sign practically anything. But they are choosing to send him little of consequence.

It is precisely the president’s relative passivity that helps us see Congress’s ambition shortage. As an institutional matter, and in terms of his uses of his formal powers, Donald Trump is almost certainly the weakest president we have seen since before the New Deal. He is intensely interested in playing the leading role in the drama of our national politics, but he views that role in terms of media and cultural theater. He has barely lifted a finger to advance any legislative agenda of his own. He has used his executive authorities less aggressively than any modern president (and has used them mostly to reverse the aggressive hyperactivity of his predecessor). He has populated his administration with many officials rightly inclined to restrain the presidency. And he has proven largely incompetent to propel the engine of the federal bureaucracy in any particular direction on most issues.

Every White House, moreover, mirrors the personality of the chief executive. So the Trump White House has been a hothouse of frenetic, undisciplined, and unproductive chaos—self-obsessed, media-obsessed, but ultimately uninterested in the substantive work of the presidency. At least in domestic affairs, we are getting a flavor of what our system of government might look like without a president.

And what we’re learning from this strange experience is that the role of presidential overreach in undermining our system has probably been overstated, while the role of congressional underreach
Members of Congress have grown more inclined to understand their ambitions in partisan terms and therefore to see themselves as part of a team that extends beyond Congress.
institution into a partisan combat zone. In this telling, it was the end of a blissful half-century of Democratic dominance that started all the trouble.

A more plausible diagnosis, offered by political scientist Frances Lee of the University of Maryland, is the simple fact that control of Congress is now in question in just about every election. This has turned up the partisan heat. The minority party at any given moment imagines it could take over next time and get everything it wants, and so it feels little pressure to cooperate with the majority just to get half a loaf or less. And the majority knows that its hold on power is endangered and so avoids bipartisan initiatives in favor of forcing the minority to take hard votes on wedge issues.

Both parties behave this way, in and out of power. And they also emulate each other’s behavior toward the president when control of the White House switches—as we have seen with the Democrats’ budget antics in the Trump era, which have been nearly identical to Republican shutdown politics in the Obama years. And both Republican and Democratic members have deferred and delegated to the president when their party has held the White House.

To some extent, this is because members are happy to pass off to the president and to judges the responsibility to make hard choices. But they do this not only when it comes to unpopular measures they don’t want tied to them. As a White House staffer in the Bush Administration, I frequently encountered member requests for executive actions in properly legislative domains that had broad popular support, or at least broad Republican support. Members were perfectly happy to claim credit for getting the president to act rather than acting themselves.

Members from the party out of power in the White House will sometimes suddenly discover a deep concern for congressional prerogatives, of course. But these discoveries rarely reach beyond the bounds of partisan convenience and have tended not to involve enacting durable institutional restraints on presidential power. Presidential overreach is convenient for Congress, because members don’t view the institution as the most important channel for their own ambition.

But members do not simply subsume their own ambition beneath that of their party. Ambitious people have pride and want prominence. That, too, remains as true today as in Madison’s time. But it points to the second, and even more pernicious, kind of redirection of ambition that is the distinct disorder of the Congress in this century, and that results in a more complicated kind of dereliction of congressional responsibility.

Simply put, many members of Congress have come to see themselves as players in a larger political ecosystem the point of which is not legislating or governing but rather engaging in a kind of performative outrage for a partisan audience. Their incentives are rooted in that understanding of our politics and so are not about legislating. They remain intensely ambitious, but their ambition is for a prominent role in the theater of our national politics. And they view the institution of Congress as a particularly effective platform for themselves—a way to raise their profile, to become celebrities in the world of cable news or talk radio, whether locally or nationally, to build a bigger social-media following, and in essence to become stars.

They can best use this platform not by engaging in the mundane work of legislating but by taking part in dramatic spectacles and by fueling the outrage that is now the engine of our politics. Even for its own members, Congress seems to be most valuable as an object for commentary and a prop in a livid morality tale about corruption.

Matt Gaetz, a freshman Republican congressman from Florida, has made a name for himself as an aggressive and quotable partisan combatant on cable television. When a reporter from Buzzfeed asked him in February whether he was concerned that he was gaining notoriety rather than prominence by doing this, his answer was: “What’s the difference? People have to know who you are and what you’re doing if your opinions are going to matter.”

It is easy to imagine President Trump himself offering the same answer. And indeed, the rise of performative politics in Congress mirrors the performative approach to the presidency embodied by Trump—though it was also very much in evidence in his predecessor’s behavior. In both the elected branches, we find people inside a key institution yearning for the role of the outsider, and therefore essentially acting on...
Congress has lost its inner life, as its deliberative spaces have become performative spaces, everything has become televised, and there is less room and time for talking in private.

the institution rather than in it. Something of the same pattern is evident in the courts today. And we can see it outside of government, too, in the professions, in the universities, in the media, and throughout the culture. Many of our key institutions are coming to be treated by their occupants as platforms for a kind of moralistic performance art.

Congress, like any serious institution, can only function by socializing its members to work together. But when those members see the institution as a stage for their individual performances, they do not become socialized and are left in a kind of anti-social form, each trying to shine. They often cannot wait to rush off the floor of the House or Senate, find a camera, and tell a waiting viewing public just how badly broken Washington is. This makes accommodation very hard to come by, and it makes legislating difficult and rare. It has everything to do with why so little gets done in Congress now and why every budget process ends with the threat of a shutdown.

This is exacerbated further by the related loss of protected spaces for deliberation in Congress. Every institution needs an inner life—a sanctum where its work is really done. Congress has progressively lost that inner life, as its deliberative spaces have become performative spaces, everything has become televised, and there is less and less room and time for talking in private. By now, the Speaker's Office around midnight as a government shutdown approaches is almost the only private space left, and that is therefore where much important legislation gets made—so that various reforms intended to democratize the Congress and make it more accountable have resulted in a less democratic and accountable institution.

This has happened in the name of transparency. And transparency is a good thing. Without it, institutions that serve a public purpose can easily become debased and unaccountable. But every good thing is a matter of degree, and we have treated transparency as a good thing with no costs, when in fact it can have some enormous costs, and these must be accounted for. In this case, the cost is a Congress that increasingly has the appearance of a show, and that does less and less real bargaining, accommodating, and legislating.

Combine that with related reforms also intended to curtail corruption—most notably the elimination of earmarks in legislation—and it becomes easier to see why the intense ambition of legislators finds itself directed to things other than legislating, and so in turn why Congress seems so dysfunctional.

None of this points to any easy answers. In fact, although pretty much everyone who watches Congress (including its members) would now agree that institutional reforms are needed, there is not much agreement about just what such reforms should aim to achieve.

Congress isn't working, but what is it failing to do? Is its purpose—like that of a European parliament—to enable the majority party to enact its agenda while it holds power? Or is its purpose—as envisioned by the framers of our Constitution—to compel accommodation among competing factions in a diverse and often divided country?

Reformers with the former goal in mind tend to see the partisan dereliction of congressional responsibility as a potentially promising development. They aim to make Congress more pliable, to remove obstacles to pure majoritarianism, and to empower party leaders and more efficient procedures. Those who seek the latter propose reforms that would instead empower Congress over the executive, empower members and especially committees over leaders, and encourage substantive policy conflict in Congress as a way to ultimately force compromise. They seek not ways to make the most of dereliction, but ways to reinvest the ambition of members in the work of their institution.

The experience of this century should teach us to prefer the second course. A weak Congress invites aggression from the other branches, and a Congress whose members direct their ambitions outside the institutional framework of our system sends that system dangerously out of balance—exacerbating partisan polarization and public frustration. Only an assertive and functional Congress—a Madisonian Congress—can help our politics find the practical accommodations essential to both addressing public problems and lowering the temperature of our overheated public life.

The insight that the problem with Congress is that members’ ambitions are now misdirected can help reformers think creatively and practically about what Congress needs. The budget process, which is
at the center of Congress's troubles, clearly needs to be reformed with this insight in mind—perhaps by eliminating the distinction between authorizing and appropriating legislation and breaking up the big spending bills into many smaller pieces that would have Congress always legislat ing but in focused and discrete ways that offer members concrete reasons to be engaged.

A transformation of oversight is also plainly in order. It is particularly important now to give Congress more of a role in federal regulation, maybe requiring its assent for major rules (as the so-called REINS Act would do), requiring it to legislate a formal regulatory budget for the executive branch just as it now imposes a budget on spending, and (as Kevin Kosar and Philip Wallach have proposed) providing it with a specialized agency to oversee regulation on the model of the Congressional Budget Office.

There is no easy answer to the incentive for performative over legislative politics, of course. But congressional reformers should consider whether transparency has gone too far, and whether limits might be placed on the televising of all floor and committee action. A much more robust role for committee work in setting the schedule for congressional activity and in drafting and revising legislation would also give members a more legitimate forum for prominence and therefore more of a chance to invest themselves in legislative work.

None of this would solve the overarching problem. But institutional reforms can be a matter of degree, and Congress could stand to improve its functioning incrementally. Such improvements should always keep in mind Madison's exhortation in Federalist 51 that "the interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place."

The real trouble, however, is that any reforms along these lines would first require members to want them. If the problem with Congress is a shortage of properly constitutional will, this is all the more of a problem when it comes to institutional reforms of the Congress.

Congress is weak and dysfunctional because that suits its members. It could renew itself only if its members wanted such renewal. The health of our constitutional system rests on the premise that the officials who populate it will be ambitious on behalf of the institutions they occupy. A shortage of constitutional ambition is the real trouble with Congress—and not only with Congress.
Time to Leave?

The question that the Jews of Britain and Europe must ponder

By Melanie Phillips

These are alarming times for Jews in Britain and Europe.

The British Labour Party is convulsed over the realization that it is riddled with anti-Semitism. Jeremy Corbyn, its leader and a friend to Hamas, has been exposed as belonging to Facebook groups hosting claims that the Jews were behind ISIS and 9/11, that the Rothschilds controlled the world’s finances, and other such paranoid theories. The backlash from the exposure of these groups revealed a tsunami of anti-Jewish insults, smears, and libels by Labour supporters. Corbyn’s responses, often truculent and insulting to the Jewish community, have only deepened the crisis.

Last year, according to the Community Security Trust, saw the highest number of anti-Semitic incidents in Britain since the CST started recording such data in 1984. In the past, surges in these incidents had occurred in response to the reporting of Israeli military action. That’s disturbing enough. But what was more disturbing here was that this record surge had occurred in the absence of any such Israeli activity.

Worse is happening in mainland Europe. In Paris, an 85-year-old survivor of the Shoah, Mireille Knoll, was stabbed to death and her body burned by a young Muslim. Last year, a man shouting “Allahu akbar” beat up Jewish schoolteacher Sarah Halimi and threw her to her death out of her Paris apartment window. In January, a teenage girl in the Paris suburb of Sarcelles wearing the uniform of her Jewish school was slashed in the face with a knife. Later that month, an eight-year-old boy was beaten in the same area because he was wearing a kippah. In February, two Jewish men in Paris were attacked with a hacksaw amid a volley of Jew-hating abuse.

In Amsterdam, a kosher restaurant long targeted for attack had its windows smashed in March by a man holding a Palestinian flag and shouting “Allahu akbar.” Holland’s chief rabbi says that, on the street, curses or taunts of “dirty Jew” are now quite normal. At the beginning of Chanukah last year, two Syrians and a Palestinian firebombed a synagogue in Gothenburg, Sweden. A few days later, a Jewish cemetery in Malmö was attacked. In Germany, the Israeli flag has been burned and Jewish pupils bullied by Arab school-

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mated. And so on and on.

In May 2017, the Pew Institute conducted a survey of 2,000 residents in each country in Eastern and Central Europe. Twenty percent of respondents said that they didn’t want Jews in their country, and 30 percent didn’t want them as neighbors. In Romania, 22 percent wanted to revoke rights of citizenship for Jews, and 18 percent of Poles said the same. Across Europe, nationalist parties, some with disturbing anti-Semitic echoes and histories, are rising.

And, so, many Jews are asking: Isn’t this 1933 all over again? Or the Weimar Republic, which enabled the rise to power of German Nazism? Isn’t history just repeating itself?

The officials governing Britain and Europe refuse to acknowledge that the Islamist threat is based on religious fanaticism.

Well, yes, and no. Yes, we can all hear the unmistakable echoes. In particular, we can recognize the refusal once again to acknowledge the true nature and extent of a gathering threat, not least among Jews themselves.

But there are certain key differences. Nazi Germany involved a state policy of genocide. Today, European governments may be ineffectual in resisting Islamist extremism or defending their Jewish populations against the broader Jew-hatred coursing through their societies—but this time most of the people of Britain and Europe are passionately opposed to what they also see as a threat to their own way of life from Islamization and the erosion of national boundaries.

They are passionately committed to upholding Western values, human rights, and one law for all.

There are three different sources of anti-Semitism in Britain and Europe: on the left, on the right, and in the Muslim community. All these threats to the Jews are connected to one another. All are rooted in threats to Britain and Europe. All are creating a perfect anti-Jewish storm.

**THE THREAT FROM THE ISLAMIC WORLD**

The threats to Britain and Europe are coming both from within and without. From without, they are coming from Islamism and Islamization. From within, they are coming from an anti-Western view of the world that also refuses to correctly identify the Islamist threat from without and combat it.

The nature of the Islamist threat takes several forms. There are the constant eruptions of terrorist violence. The vast majority of terror attacks in Britain and Europe is the work of Islamic extremists. Intelligence officials say that 23,000 jihadists who pose some degree of terrorism risk are living in Britain, with 3,000—only!—under investigation or active monitoring.

There's sexual violence. Britain has lived through grooming and pimping gangs, overwhelmingly composed of men of Pakistani Muslim heritage targeting young white girls as “trash.” Germany and Sweden have seen a huge rise in rape and sexual violence associated with Muslim migrants.

Then there's the cultural attack, as in the “Trojan Horse” infiltration of schools in Birmingham by Muslim extremists aimed to force them to conform to Islamic precepts. Similar infiltration of Labour Party constituencies, as attested by one or two brave Labour MPs, aims to force the party to conform to Muslim demands.

Despite all this, the officials governing Britain and Europe refuse to acknowledge that the Islamist threat is based on religious fanaticism—on an interpretation of Islam that although not supported by many Muslims is nevertheless dominant within the Islamic world. Instead, identifying these threats as rooted in Islam is damned as Islamophobic.

Since any criticism of Islam is deemed Islamophobic, there’s a refusal to acknowledge the enormous problem of Muslim anti-Semitism. Yet this is one of the principal drivers of the Islamist threat to the West. Islamist ideologues and jihadists believe that modernity is a threat to Islam that must be eradicated and that the Jews are the demonic creators of modernity. Paranoid conspiracy theories and other deranged falsehoods about Jews pour out of the Islamic world in an unstoppable torrent. Opinion polls consistently show that hatred of Jews is far more prevalent among Muslims than in the wider community. The Muslim British journalist Mehdi Hasan wrote in 2013: “Anti-Semitism isn’t just tolerated in some sections of the British Muslim community; it’s routine and commonplace…. It’s our dirty little secret.”

CST figures suggest that a disproportionate number of Muslims are involved in anti-Jewish attacks. Out of 420 anti-Semitic offenders in 2017 of whom an ethnic description was obtained, 238 were described as white Europeans, 77 as black, 75 as Asian, and 30 as Arab or north African. Muslims are officially
estimated to constitute just over 4 percent of Britain's population. Although it's not possible to be exact, the proportion of Muslim offenders in the CST figures would seem to be several times more than 4 percent. It's apparently Islamophobic to draw attention to these things.

We have to be very careful not to promote true prejudice against Muslims, just as we would be regarding any other group. Many Muslims are opposed to Islamist extremism, and Muslims are most of its victims.

But there is enormous pressure not to acknowledge the threats to life and liberty that are widespread within the Muslim world, including anti-Semitism. Anyone who calls out these threats is denounced as a bigot. But those who issue such denunciations themselves help perpetuate Muslim Jew-hatred.

The reason no one is allowed to talk about Muslim anti-Semitism is the cultural prism through which left-wing progressive circles view the world. And this represents the threat from within.

ANTI-WEST LEFT-THINK

THIS LEFT-WING PRISM is responsible for eroding Western values, undermining the defense of Britain and Europe against jihad, and exposing Jews to attack. These are all connected. You cannot understand the resurgence of paranoid, unhinged anti-Semitism unless you understand that the West has been tearing up the very idea of reason itself along with the moral codes at the heart of Western civilization.

Leftists view the West as the historic and current oppressor of the entire developing world. This Western cultural self-hatred has a complex history, at the root of which lies the erosion of biblical morality by the tides of secularism. But in my view, the key political driver of this cultural demoralization was the Holocaust.

It simply smashed to smithereens Europe's belief in itself as the exemplar of superior cultural values. The Holocaust was conceived and directed, after all, in the heartlands of high European culture, the supposed crucible of enlightenment and rationality. It wasn't just the Jews who died in the extermination camps: It was also the West's (or Europe's) concept of itself as moral and rational.

Lethally demoralized, Western cultural elites took an axe to the building blocks of their civilization: an axe to education as the transmission of that civilization, an axe to the traditional family as the best way to generate emotionally resilient inheritors of that civilization, and an axe to national identity as the political expression of that civilization.

Policies and laws passed by national governments now had to take second place to transnational institutions, such as the UN and EU, and legal frameworks, such as international human-rights law. With no Western nation or values thought worthy of defending to the death, wars to establish justice and freedom were deemed inferior to conflict resolution, negotiation, and peace processes. Between God and the devil, Western liberals would split the difference and broker a triumphant compromise.

National identity was replaced by factional interest groups. Morality was replaced by a view of the world based on competing power blocs. Biblical morality was replaced by man-made, universalizing ideologies such as moral and cultural relativism or multiculturalism.

Every one of these ideologies was anti-Judaism or anti-Israel. Jews, after all, are always in the way of any universalizing ideology. We are the people of one book alone and of one land alone. We are ha'ivrîm, the people from the other side—the people who have always dwelled alone. This is something many diaspora Jews try to deny. It is something our postmodern culture will not accept. And it is something that has helped fuel the madness over Israel.

ISRAEL OBSESSION

IT'S A COMMONPLACE that the hatred of Israel on the left was caused by the Israeli David supposedly turning into Goliath. That, though, doesn't begin to explain it.

Western cultural self-hatred has a complicated history, but the key political driver of this demoralization was the Holocaust.

Anti-Israelism has exactly the same characteristics that make traditional anti-Semitism a unique derangement. Both are based entirely on falsehoods and malicious distortions; both single out Israel and the Jews for double standards and treatment afforded to no other nation, people, or cause; both accuse Israel or the Jews of crimes of which they are not only innocent but are in fact the victims; both dehumanize Israel or the Jewish people; both impute to Israel or the Jewish people demonic global conspiratorial power; both are utterly beyond reason.
Yet on the left, this connection is vehemently denied. The treatment of Israel is described as mere “criticism” of its behavior. But it isn’t criticism at all. Criticism is rational. This is irrational and malicious demonization and delegitimization of Israel and of Zionism. Zionism is merely the right of the Jewish people to self-determination. This anti-Zionism singles out the Jews alone for the destruction of their nationhood.

The distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is fake. As Ruth Wisse has observed: “Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism—combined into the modern phenomena of anti-Semitism/Zionism—can best be described as the organization of politics against the Jews.”

The Western left in general has absorbed the Marxist concept that everything has to be understood in terms of political power.

Semitism is fake. As Ruth Wisse has observed: “Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism—combined into the modern phenomena of anti-Semitism/Zionism—can best be described as the organization of politics against the Jews.”

WHY LEFT-WING ANTI-SEMITISM?

THIS IS THE NEW ANTI-SEMITISM. Trying to understand it, however, is like peeling a rotten onion: Beneath every rancid layer lies a yet more rancid layer.

The outer, most visible layer is fairly obvious. The left in general now subscribes to beliefs once considered extreme. It has absorbed the Marxist concept that everything has to be understood in terms of political power. The world is divided into the powerful and the powerless. Those with power can never be good; those without power can never be bad. Those who make money have power over those who don’t make money. Those who make money are bad; those without money are good. Jews make money. Therefore Jews are powerful and bad.

The 19th-century German anti-Semite Wilhelm Marr, who is credited with inventing the term, ascribed to the Jews the attribute of global power. Israel—which isn’t really Western at all—is seen as menacingly powerful. That is its crime, and that is also why anti-Israelism is umbilically connected to anti-Semitism. Even though Jews are now equipped with military power solely to defend themselves against annihilation, this breathes life into the paranoid delusion that the Jews are so powerful that they pose a threat to everyone else.

The next layer of the onion is even more rank. This is that—as the black joke that isn’t a joke at all would have it—the West will never forgive the Jews for the Holocaust. This isn’t just because of the terrible legacy of guilt carried by the West. It is because of jealousy.

What on earth about the Holocaust can provoke such jealousy? It gives the Jews what many in the West perceive as the trump card of victimhood.

I have often heard the Jews accused of sucking up all the victimhood in the world and leaving no room for anyone else to be a victim. What does this nonsensical claim mean? It can only mean that the enormity of the crime against the Jews was so vast that people think any victim status claimed by anyone else is rendered minor by comparison and thus devalued.

But why do these people want to be considered victims in the first place? It’s because victimization gives them a moral free pass. The belief is that if you are a victim, you can’t be held responsible for your own misdeeds. You can never be a victimizer; you can never be a racist; you can never be a genocidal psychopath.

And so no one in the developing world can ever be a victimizer, a racist, or a genocidal psychopath. They can only ever be the victims of such people. The Palestinian Arabs can only ever be their victims. And as such, the Palestinian Arabs and the rest of the developing world obtain a get-out-of-jail-free card for everything—including genocidal mass murder.

So now every group that doesn’t conform to the left-wing definition of power—deemed to be pale, male, heterosexual, Western—claims victim status and that get-out-of-jail-free card. That’s our victim culture. It now drives all before it. But Jews can’t be victims because, as everyone knows, they emerged from the Holocaust to run the financial world, the media, the law, the arts, American foreign policy. So the Jews are all-powerful, aren’t they?

Yet Jews are in fact the most persecuted people on earth, who even now have to sacrifice their children in Israel to defend themselves year in, year out against genocidal fanatics bent on their extermination. So how can this not be recognized?

And here’s where we peel down to the most sickening layer of the onion. For the real reason for the burning resentment against the Jews over their status as supreme victims is that it’s thought the Holocaust enabled them to get away with it.

Get away with what, exactly? Why, all the stuff that anti-Semites think about the Jews, that they are rapacious and disloyal and grasping and are out to control the world. In other words, such people think these anti-Semitic libels are actually true; but the Jews’ status as ultimate victims has silenced people who can
no longer utter them. And that’s resented as unfair.

It is this reaction by anti-Semites to the Holocaust, no less, that has helped create our invidious victim culture. People thought that if the Jews had got a free pass for their misdeeds, then so too could any group that claimed to be victims. The difference, though, is that, while victim groups thus claim impunity for acts of irresponsibility, abuses of power, or other bad behavior, the Jews are by contrast wholly innocent of the crimes that anti-Semites so falsely lay at their door.

Thus, victim culture is innately anti-Jew. But victim culture lies at the very heart of progressive left-wing thinking.

Moreover, support for Palestinianism is also innately anti-Jew. So-called Palestinian identity is a fiction invented to exterminate the uniquely historically and legally valid Jewish claim to the land of Israel. Mahmoud Abbas, viewed by the Western left as a moderate entitled to a state, has a doctorate in Holocaust denial, explicitly venerates the wartime Palestinian Nazi-ally Haj Amin al-Husseini, and uses his media outlets to transmit Nazi-style demonization of the Jews.

In the week of Holocaust Memorial Day, PA TV misrepresented a photograph of concentration-camp victims as Arabs and wrote that Jews burned Arabs in Nazi ovens. Every single person who supports the Palestinian agenda of Holocaust denial, attacks on Judaism, and unhinged conspiracy theories about Jewish power now be so shocked that other Labour Party members are coming out themselves with Holocaust denial, attacks on Judaism, and unhinged conspiracy theories about Jewish power.

THE LEFT CAN’T ADMIT ITS ANTI-SEMITISM

THE FACT is that the new anti-Semitism is a seamless robe of Israel-hatred and Jew-hatred. People deny this because they think of anti-Semitism as only against Jews as people. They can’t recognize it when it’s against the collective Jew in the State of Israel.

Those on the left also believe that they embody virtue so they can’t possibly be anti-Semitic. Only the right can be anti-Jew. This is historically and philosophically illiterate. Both left and right have the same parent in the counter-Enlightenment and German romanticism. This spawned in due course both Communism and Fascism. Karl Marx wrote: “What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money.”

Left-wingers, however, are constitutionally unable to accept that they can be racist or anti-Semitic because such an admission would undermine their self-image of unimpeachable moral purity and go right to the root of their entire political and moral personality. So they shelter behind the fiction that hating Israel is decent and moral while hating Jews is beyond the pale. We can hear this self-serving solecism from some who claim to have seen the light about Labour Party anti-Semitism, and who say they now realize they were wrong to blame all Jews for the crimes of Israel.

Anti-Israelism is inescapably anti-Jew. Yet anti-Israelism is the default position in progressive circles. So even if Jeremy Corbyn were deposed tomorrow, anti-Semitism on the British left would not disappear. The symbiosis between hatred of Israel and hatred of Jews is now part of the DNA of the progressive world.

ISLAMIZATION AND NATIONALISM

BECAUSE THOSE PROGRESSIVES believe that anti-Semitism is to be found only on the nationalist right, the very same left-wingers who obsessively anathematize Israel, support its Arab would-be destroyers, and are struck dumb about Muslim anti-Semitism in Europe strike a pose of pious concern about anti-Semitism among European nationalists. Yet although some of those nationalists do have troubling anti-Semitic or fascist overtones, Jews have much more to fear from those they are trying to stop.

A German government study published in January found that male migrants may be responsible for more than 90 percent of a recent increase in violent crime. In Sweden, a leaked report last year revealed that there were now 61 Islamic “no-go zones” where Islamist extremists have taken over. Sweden’s National Police Commissioner, Dan Eliasson, pleaded, “Help us, help us!”—warning that the police could no longer uphold the law.

Across Europe, the entire political establishment has for years connived at or turned a blind eye
to the mass immigration of mainly Muslim migrants and the steady march of Islamization—the evidence for which is demonstrated not least by the attempt to criminalize as “Islamophobic” any criticism of the migrants or concern about the resulting erosion of Western culture.

As a result of this political and cultural disenfranchisement, the people of Europe are now turning to parties outside the political establishment that promise an end to uncontrolled mass immigration. For this, such voters are dismissed as bigots and xenophobes. The aggressive or anti-Semitic behavior by many migrants is ignored or denied.

Not only is it dangerous for Jews to oppose Europeans’ pursuit of their own national identity; it is also, in fact, morally wrong.

Instead, those who want to stop this influx are themselves demonized as racists and anti-Semites. The president of the European Jewish Congress, Moshe Kantor, says: “Right-wing populist parties are resorting to both anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant discourse to gather political support.”

Now, there’s no doubt that there is an enduring strand of virulent, indigenous anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Research suggests that almost one in five Hungarians openly demands the emigration of the Jews. In Poland, the government is intent upon denying its anti-Semitic past. A new law criminalizes anyone who accuses Poland of having been complicit in the Holocaust. (As it happens, I have written a novel, The Legacy, which has just been published and which deals with this very issue—and which even features a walk-on role for the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation.)

Those who deny their anti-Semitism are doomed to repeat it. So it is in Poland. Anti-Semitic outbursts in the Polish media and among politicians have significantly increased since the law’s passage last February, with wild claims of Jewish conspiracies and comparisons of Jews to animals.

So traditional, old-style Jew-hatred is unfortunately still very prevalent in countries with a terrible history of persecuting the Jews. Some of the new ultra-nationalist parties coming to the fore in Europe, such as the Austrian Freedom Party, Golden Dawn in Greece, or Jobbik in Hungary, are openly anti-Semitic or have Nazi pasts. Others, though, merely want to restore and defend national identity, democratic national sovereignty, and Western cultural norms and practices against creeping Islamization. Yet all parties committed to the defense of Western cultural norms and national identity in Europe are being equally damned as racist, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic.

BRITISH JEWS

In Britain, the government’s failure to identify correctly and tackle Islamist extremism is turning the Jewish community into collateral damage. The refusal to acknowledge that the problem of Islamist extremism is particular to Muslim culture—although many Muslims are opposed to such extremism—has meant that the government strategy for dealing with it involves imposing equal restrictions on all religious practices it believes lie outside the liberal consensus, such as the refusal to teach sexuality in ultra-orthodox Jewish schools. Throughout Europe there are growing pressures to ban circumcision and ritual slaughter. This liberal secular intolerance poses a real threat to religious Jewish life.

British Jews themselves, however, are also reluctant to call out Muslim extremism. Recently the chief rabbi, Efraim Mirvis, broke cover to complain that Muslim leaders were silent in the fight against rising anti-Semitism. “The threat to Judaism and Jews from the world of Islam is one which can only be cured from within the world of Islam,” he said. Quite right. But Jewish leaders themselves urged the British government under Prime Minister David Cameron (to his astonishment and irritation) to admit many more Muslim migrants; and they appear more anxious to make common cause against Islamophobia and xenophobia than to bring the full extent and nature of Muslim anti-Semitism into the open.

More dangerous still, Jews on the left who promote multiculturalism and campaign loudly against Islamophobia are themselves helping to stoke anti-Semitism. People who are angry and resentful at the way mass immigration is destroying their national identity bitterly resent being told by Diaspora Jews who have their own potential refuge in Israel that it’s racist to oppose multiculturalism. Not only is it dangerous for Jews to oppose Europeans’ pursuit of their own national identity. It’s morally wrong. We Jews have ours. Why can’t they have theirs?

In Britain, most Jews voted against Brexit. They are frightened by assertions of national identity. They think it leads to nationalism, and that means anti-Semitism. They think Europe protects against anti-Semitism and that Brexit is motivated by nationalism.
Haven’t they noticed that the rise of the ethno-nationalist groups in Europe that frighten them so much has taken place under rule by, and precisely because of, the EU? Jews are protected only when a culture feels confident and strong. Which is why, in fact, Brexit offers a sliver of hope. The revival of British national identity may, over time, see off group rights and identity politics. Greater cultural and national confidence should mean more tolerance of Jews, not less.

THE LOST SOUL OF EUROPE

WHY IS ANTI-SEMITISM on the rise in the West? Broadly because the West is in trouble. And a society in trouble always turns on the Jews. So much general hatred and irrationality now course through the West. Anti-Semitism, though, is not just a prejudice or a species of bigotry or hatred. It’s much more than that. It represents a kind of moral and spiritual death.

Europe lost its soul in the Shoah: the soul that was created by Jewish biblical precepts. Turning against itself, Europe has turned on the Jews. Without its Christian base, the West is nothing. But Christianity in Britain and Europe lost its way a long time ago. Losing their faith, many Christian churches turned instead to social and political activism, liberation theology, and the radical Marxist analysis of the World Council of Churches. Those progressive churches have denied their Jewish parent. Embracing instead their Islamist assassin in the misguided hope of saving their flock, they are in the forefront of the charge against Israel. In the process, they are destroying themselves. But a society without a religious core rests on sand.

Many Jews, especially those on the left, see no problem with mass Muslim immigration except for Islamophobia. Such Jews are either indifferent to Israel or they believe many of the lies told about it. Indeed, tragically, many of the leaders of the new anti-Semitism are themselves Jews.

For all these members of the tribe, the idea that it may be time for the Jews to leave Britain is no more than paranoid hysteria. For other British Jews, though, the current situation is deeply, profoundly upsetting and lowering. The anti-Semitism is bad enough. But it’s not just the anti-Semitism that’s so devastating. It’s the reaction to those who call it out for what it is.

The same people who claim to see anti-Semitism in European populism or the political base of Donald Trump regularly accuse Jews of claiming anti-Semitism just to “sanitize the crimes of Israel” or “bring down Jeremy Corbyn.”

This reaction is worse, far worse, than the anti-Semitism itself. It’s worse even than indifference. For it imputes to the Jews malicious intent in claiming that Jewish people are being maliciously targeted. It says they are lying. It blames the Jews for their own victimization.

This reaction is the inescapable evidence that the Jews are being abandoned. Those of us who have loved Britain for its gentleness, its tolerance, its decency, its stoicism, its reasonableness, and the dampness of both its weather and national temperament feel as if we have been orphaned. But maybe we were living all along in a fool’s paradise.

Some people think Europe is over, that the demographics are against it and that it will become a majority-Muslim culture in a few decades. My guess is that Europe won’t go down without a fight. If that happens, the Jews are likely to get it in the neck from all sides. Whichever way it goes, it’s not a pleasant prospect.

So is it time to leave? It’s very personal, and I wouldn’t presume to advise anyone what to do. I can only speak for myself and say that for some years now, I’ve been spending a great deal of my time in Israel. Because even with 150,000 Hezbollah rockets pointing at us from Lebanon, even with Hamas trying every day to murder us, and even with Iran working toward its genocide bomb to wipe us out, Israel is where I feel so much safer and the air is so much sweeter, and it’s Israel is where Jews are not on their knees and where no one will ever make me feel I am not entitled to live and don’t properly belong.
Game of Peacock Thrones

The days of the Islamic Republic of Iran may be drawing to a close. What next?

By Sohrab Ahmari

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oon after the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his Parisian exile in 1979 to seize power in Iran, his domestic opponents began reassuring themselves that the new regime’s expiration date was almost up, that their internal occupation by Islamists would soon be over. Nearly 40 years later, those predictions seem foolish in retrospect—but perhaps not in prospect. For while its Shiite imperium extends from balmy Arabia to snowcapped Lebanon, the Islamic Republic of Iran faces crisis on the home front. Lately, not a day goes by without at least one display of popular anger and usually several.

The death of the actor Nasser Malek Motiee triggered the latest explosion in May. Before the 1979 revolution put the kibosh on his career, Motiee had been a fixture of the potboilers, police procedurals, and lusty comedies (*Black-Clad Mehdi and the Hot Pants!*), known collectively as “Film Farsi.” In the 1969 noir *Qeysar*, he played a butcher who sets out to avenge his sister’s rape, only to be stabbed to death by her assailants. “Qeysar!” the butcher cries out to his brother, the titular antihero of the film. “Where are you? They’ve killed your brother!”

Thousands flocked to Motiee’s funeral in Tehran, though he had been the subject of a media blackout and, save for a single role in 2014, hadn’t been permitted to appear on the silver screen for four decades. “Our state-run media is our disgrace!” his fans chanted at his funeral. Met with tear gas and the truncheons of security forces, they put a twist on Motiee’s best-known line: “Qeysar! Where are you? They’ve killed the people!”

Meanwhile, Iranian truck drivers have been on a nationwide strike for more than a week as of this writ-

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While regime change is not on the American agenda, the Islamic Republic may enter its twilight of its own accord. Make no mistake: The process could take years.

The drivers park their trucks on long stretches of highway and block access to gas stations and government buildings in protest against low wages, road tolls, and benefits cuts. They aren't alone. Teachers, steelworkers, hospital staff, railway employees, and sugar-factory hands are among the other groups that have walked off the job over the regime's apparent refusal to spread the nuclear-deal “butter” promised by the Obama administration—released Iranian assets that might total as much as $150 billion.

Women are removing their headscarves in defiance of compulsory veiling. Often, security forces hesitate to confront them directly, lest they incur the wrath of the public, though most of the women are identified and arrested after the fact. This gesture of feminine resistance, which first emerged during a mass uprising in December and January, has now become commonplace. And while the New Year’s uprising was suppressed, smaller, more scattered demonstrations continue to break out, forcing the regime to play whack-a-mole with dissidents.

The furies of the present have joined forces with the ghosts of the past. In April, a construction worker excavated a mummified body near the tomb of a Shiite saint in southern Tehran. The mummy appeared to resemble the corpse of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the founder of modern Iran, last seen in sepia-toned newspaper photographs decades earlier. The regime’s sketchy reaction—first confirming and later denying the rumors and eventually confiscating the mummy—only intensified the fervid speculation roiling the streets. Chants of “Long live Reza Shah!” rang out from soccer stadiums. Footage posted to social media showed a lion-and-sun flag, Iran’s traditional monarchic standard, fluttering high above a major thoroughfare in the city of Karaj.

President Trump’s decision to withdraw the U.S. from the nuclear deal will no doubt compound the pressures bearing down on the mullahs. While regime change is not on the American agenda, the Islamic Republic may enter its twilight of its own accord. Make no mistake: The process could take years. The exact shape of events is impossible to foresee. Even so, American policy must prepare for the possibility. The end of Islamist rule in Iran would be a world-historical event and an unalloyed good for the country and its neighbors, marking a return to normalcy four decades after the Ayatollah Khomeini founded his regime.

But what exactly is that normal? Some in the West hope that events in Iran today will revive the spirit of 1989. A liberal flowering in Iran would redeem the Arab Spring, the rise of populists in Central and Eastern Europe, and America’s own Trumpian turn, among other recent disappointments. What better proof that history tends toward liberalism than the land of the scowling ayatollahs going liberal democratic?

Such velvety dreams are unlikely to materialize, however. Policymakers in Washington and other Western capitals would be wise to gird themselves for the more realistic outcomes for an Iran after the mullahs.

For more than two millennia, the unchanging principle of Iranian political life was estebdad, or arbitrary rule, and it remains so today. One defining feature was state ownership of all land. The state could grant plots to various classes as a special privilege but never as a matter of right. The state could grant plots to various classes as a special privilege but never as a matter of right. Moreover, all economic activity, agricultural or otherwise, involved winning the favor of the state; what the state gave, the state could take away. The implications for Iran’s political development were profound.

“Social classes did not enjoy any rights independent from the state,” the Oxford historian Homa Katouzian has persuasively argued, and “there was no law outside the state, which stood above society, despite a body of rules that were subject to rapid and unpredictable change.” Thus, “unlike in Europe, the state’s legitimacy was not founded in law and the consent of influential social classes.” From the satrap to the peasant, all lived in fear of and at the mercy of the state.

Pre-Islamic Persia had laws, to be sure, and with the Arab conquest came an elaborate religious code governing nearly every aspect of life. Yet neither the pre-Islamic law nor Shariah could order the relationship between state and society. Neither could act as a constitutional or fundamental law, a concept that simply didn’t exist in Iran. As Katouzian notes, “this is what made the arbitrary exercise of power possible, indeed normal.” State agents could punish without license from Shariah—or decline to enforce Shariah precepts when it pleased them.

The arbitrariness of power extended to its source
As political actors, Iranians toggled between high passion and magical idealism, on the one hand, and cynical passivity, civic indolence, and shocking venality, on the other.

The MAIN political consequences of estebdad were disorder and discontinuity. There were good shahs, great ones even. And there were bad ones. The problem was that government was never established on a principle or set of principles. There were no Permanent Things. Adalat, justice, wasn’t something that could be baked into a system. The best one could hope for was a just shah. Everything depended on the character and personality of the man sitting on the Peacock Throne. As political actors, Iranians toggled between high passion and magical idealism, on the one hand, and cynical passivity, civic indolence, and shocking venality, on the other. There was no moderate mean between these two extremes.

So it was that, when Western-style modernity and nationalism arrived, Iranians were caught flat-footed. Two-and-a-half millennia earlier, Persia had been the superpower of its day. But by the late 19th century, the country had reached a nadir. It was a time of illiteracy, malaria, and poverty, and the nation, especially the intellectual elite, was newly awakening to Iran’s dilapidation, material and spiritual. Shame as much as pride thus fueled the nascent Iranian nationalism. A poem of the era summed up the state of affairs:

Our army the laughingstock of the world.
Our princes deserving of the pity of beggars.
Our clerics craving the justice of the unbelievers.
Our towns each a metropolis of dirt.

Thanks to European imperialism and early globalization, Iranians came into closer contact with the West than ever before, and this only heightened their sense of humiliation and inadequacy. Diplomats, Orientalists, concessionaires, and missionaries brought with them the seeds of modernity along with their own commercial, scholarly, and imperial ambitions. These developments triggered an unprecedented legitimacy crisis in Iran at the turn of the 20th century. Western-educated elites clamored for mashrutiat, government that was “conditional” on the consent of the people. Similar ideas percolated among some of the ulama, the high priests of Shiite Islam. Drawing on pan-Islamist ideas then gaining currency across the Middle East, leading ulama called for lawful government in which “the people—be they shah or beggar—would be equal,” as one influential cleric put it.

In 1906, the Majlis, or parliament, was established. But Iran’s brief experiment with constitutionalism was a disaster. The great powers, Moscow especially, were hostile to constitutionalism. The forces of estebdad wouldn’t relinquish so easily. And the constitutionalists were bitterly divided among themselves. The two decades that followed were marked by foreign invasion, tribal rebellions, and license instead of ordered liberty. Soon self-government came to be associated with terror, famine, and chaos.

In the early 1920s, an ambitious officer named Reza Khan stabilized the country’s borders, put down various rebellions, and forged a new nation-state from...
With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the people lost the individual and social liberties they had enjoyed under the shah but gained none of the justice and stability they pined for.

the shabby remains of the Persian Empire. The Majlis declared him shah in 1925, and he was crowned the following year. He dragged Iran, kicking and screaming, out of the depths of backwardness. The oil era had already dawned (in 1901), and the flow of black gold quickened his various projects. Roads were built, universities founded, a modern civil service born, even a new calendar adopted. Civil law and secular lawyers eclipsed Shariah and the clergy. Women were liberated, according to Reza Shah’s lights, whether they liked it or not. Estebedad remained the supreme principle, though it gradually softened, particularly under his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, the last monarch, who ascended the Peacock Throne in 1941 following his father’s abdication.

Reza Shah’s project would end six decades later in the Islamic Revolution. But how did Khomeini pull it off? Under the Pahlavis, Iranians had achieved an unprecedented degree of prosperity and social mobility. Toward the end, in the 1960s and ‘70s, they grew accustomed to double-digit growth, vacations abroad, children educated at universities in Europe and America, international prestige. Life was good. Yet millions of Iranians managed to convince themselves that they would be better off with Khomeini at the helm. This was political ingratitude on an incomprehensible scale.

Khomeini’s powers of deception can’t be overstated. Few of those who supported him, particularly among the middle classes, appreciated that they were about to replace a benign autocracy with an Islamist state. Yet deception on a mass scale is impossible without a strong appetite for it on the part of the deceived.

Recall that estebedad had yielded centuries of disorder and discontinuity. Dynasties and shahs came and went, but there was nothing solid to hold on to. The pace of disruption and discontinuity accelerated under the Pahlavis. The prosperity and stability of the era were real enough. But modernity handed down from on high was dizzying. Mohammad Reza Shah, especially, lost sight of how conservative his people really were. Perhaps Iran wasn’t ready for Black-Clad Mehdi and the Hot Pants! and social-insurance schemes for Tehran prostitutes. Perhaps it wasn’t wise for the shah to be known to cavort with Madame Claude’s girls.

In 1971, the shah attempted to paint something like a vision of continuity with his celebrations of 2,500 years of Persian monarchy. He had the right idea anyway, though in execution it entailed little more than a decadent party in the desert. Khomeini’s vision of Islamic justice, melded with vague leftist talk about the triumph of the dispossessed, was more enticing. Amid the “confusion of a people of high medieval culture awakening to oil and money,” as V.S. Naipaul described Iran’s revolutionary generation, Khomeini promised community, enchantment, and, above all, continuity with a wholesome Islamic past.

Yet the Islamic Republic proved even more destabilizing and discontinuous with Iranian history than had the dynasty it replaced. Resurrecting the rule of the warrior-imams of the seventh century and fashioning a sort of neo-Islamic Man called for a police-and-surveillance state that was utterly alien to Iranians. Islamic continuity, moreover, came at the expense of national pride and memory. Khomeini and his followers had no love for the pre-Islamic elements of Iranian identity, and like all totalitarians, they set out to erase whatever was incongruous with their ideology.

A state that exercised arbitrary power was one thing; a state that sought to reshape the soul quite another. The people lost the individual and social liberties they had enjoyed under the shah but gained none of the justice and stability they pined for. The new regime made life a misery in the name of ideology while retaining all of the venality and corruption of a classical Persian court. Forty years later, Iranians have had more than their fill of the Islamic Republic.

The key to Iran’s political future lies in the tension between the ineluctability of estebedad and the longing for continuity. If the Islamic Republic is to give way to a decent order, sooner rather than later, Iranians must resolve the dilemmas that have brought them to this point. This requires honesty and a willingness to read Iranian history as it really is.

First, Iranian political culture demands a living source of authority to embody the will of the nation and stand above a fractious and ethnically heterogeneous society. Put another way, Iranians need a “shah” of some sort. They have never lived collectively without one, and their political imagination has always
been directed toward a throne. The constitutionalist experiment of the early 20th century coexisted (badly) with monarchic authority, and the current Islamic Republic has a supreme leader—which is to say, a shah by another name. It is the height of utopianism to imagine that a 2,500-year-old tradition can be wiped away.

The presence of a shah needn't mean the absence of rule of law, deliberative politics, or any of the other elements of ordered liberty that the West cherishes in its own systems. As the late Bernard Lewis insisted when speaking of the Arab world, it is possible to have freedom and deliberation and checks and balances within nonrepresentative, nondemocratic institutions. Iran has had a Majlis for more than a century, at various points during which the body operated as a genuine legislative chamber. In a post-Islamic Republic Iran, the Majlis can be revived as a true legislative body. But a revitalized Majlis wouldn't obviate the need for a living authority, an ultimate guarantor of the state and of Iranian freedom.

A shah, moreover, can galvanize opposition to the current regime. The failed 2009 Green uprising and the more recent New Year's revolt showed that while leaderless mass movements can lay bare the regime's legitimacy deficit, they can't finally overthrow the Islamic Republic. Labor strikes and hijab campaigns and occasional skirmishes with the security forces are useful. But they can't answer the question: “Who do you propose should rule us?”

Perhaps the opposition forces will conjure a leader at the right moment and in organic fashion. Or maybe an ambitious would-be shah will emerge from among the security apparatus. Yet the most plausible current candidate is probably Reza Pahlavi, Reza Shah's exiled grandson, whose prestige and popularity have spiked in recent years, as Iranians born after the revolution reckon with what they lost to their parents' collective folly. Among the revolutionary slogans in currency today, the one with the greatest political meaning and potential is “Long live Reza Shah!” The slogan is pregnant with nostalgia, yes, but also with political imagination.

Second, Iranian political culture demands a source of continuity with Persian history. The anxieties associated with modernity and centuries of historical discontinuity drove Iranians into the arms of Khomeini and his bearded minions, who promised a connection to Shiite tradition. Khomeinism turned out to be a bloody failure, but there is scant reason to imagine the thirst for continuity has been quenched.

To weather the storms of modernity, Iranians need a point of orientation—perhaps a mast to tie themselves to. Islamism wasn't it. Iranian nationalism, however, could be the answer, and, judging by the nationalist tone of the current upheaval, it is the one the people have already hit upon.

When protestors chant “We Will Die to Get Iran Back,” “Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, My Life Only for Iran,” and “Let Syria Be, Do Something for Me,” they are expressing a positive vision of Iranian nationhood: No longer do they wish to pay the price for the regime's Shiite hegemonic ambitions. Iranian blood should be spilled for Iran, not Gaza, which for most Iranians is little more than a geographic abstraction. It is precisely its nationalist dimension that makes the current revolt the most potent the mullahs have yet faced. Nationalism, after all, is a much stronger force, and the longing for historical continuity runs much deeper in Iran than liberal-democratic aspiration. Westerners who wish to see a replay of Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 in today's Iran will find the lessons of Iranian history hard and distasteful, but Iranians and their friends who wish to see past the Islamic Republic must pay heed.
IN A CONTROVERSIAL Supreme Court case arising from Colorado's treatment of gay rights and private businesses, Justice Anthony Kennedy announced that the Court would stand to protect the dignity of minorities singled out by state animosity: “If the constitutional conception of ‘equal protection of the laws’ means anything,” he wrote in his majority opinion, “it must at the very least mean that a bare desire to harm a politically unpopular group cannot constitute a legitimate government interest.”* You might think this quote comes from Justice Kennedy's majority opinion in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado*, in which seven of the Court’s nine members agreed to strike down Colorado's punishment of a Christian baker for refusing to create a custom-made cake celebrating a same-sex wedding. But in fact, the quote is from Justice Kennedy's opinion in the 1996 case *Romer v. Evans*, a case involving a Colorado law that protected the right of private companies to discriminate against homosexuals.

Kennedy's attempt to frame his constitutional protection for homosexuals in terms of human dignity for all against what he saw as the unreasonable animosity of Colorado's popular majority was controversial in 1996. In his Romer dissent, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote that “the Court's opinion is so long on emotive utterance and so short on relevant legal citation.” And it is no less controversial today. But it became the basis for Kennedy's generation-long work of expanding constitutional protection for homosexuals. He began with Romer. Then came the Court's 2003 announcement of a right to engage in homosexual sodomy. That was followed by the Court's 2013 decision striking down the federal Defense of Marriage Act. All this was capped off by the Court's 2015 announcement of a constitutional right to same-sex marriage. Kennedy authored all of these opinions for the Court, elaborating what might be called a “jurisprudence of dignity.”

Perhaps it is ironic, then, that Justice Kennedy invoked his jurisprudence of dignity in the other direction...
in Masterpiece Cakeshop. He wrote for the court not in favor of the homosexual couple who demanded that Jack Phillips bake a cake celebrating their wedding, but rather in favor of Phillips. But it is unsurprising—except, perhaps, among those who believe that traditional religious beliefs are themselves undignified.

In 2012, Charlie Craig and Dave Mullins visited the Masterpiece Cakeshop in Lakewood, Colorado. They were planning to marry. Though same-sex marriage was not yet legal in Colorado then, it was legal in Massachusetts; so they planned to marry in Massachusetts, then return home to Colorado to celebrate with friends and family. And a cake.

“I’ll make your birthday cakes, shower cakes, sell you cookies and brownies,” Mr. Phillips told them, according to the Supreme Court’s opinion. “I just don’t make cakes for same sex weddings.” The reason for Phillips’s refusal was straightforward. “Jack Phillips is an expert baker who has owned and operated the shop for 24 years,” the Court explained. “Phillips is a devout Christian. He has explained that his ‘main goal in life is to be obedient to’ Jesus Christ and Christ’s ‘teachings in all aspects of his life.’ ... And he seeks to ‘honor God through his work at Masterpiece Cakeshop.’” Which, consistent with the Christian Bible’s teachings and tradition, does not include celebrating one man marrying another.

Another couple might have rejected Phillips’s offer and vowed never to buy another cupcake from him ever again. But Craig and Mullins took another approach: They called upon the State of Colorado, through the state’s Civil Rights Commission, to punish Phillips for what he’d done.

Colorado agreed. Rejecting Phillips’s invocation of his First Amendment rights to free speech and free exercise of his religion, the state’s commission ordered Phillips to “cease and desist from discriminating against [Craig and Mullins] and other same-sex couples by refusing to sell them wedding cakes or any product [he] would sell to heterosexual couples.” Which is to say, the state ordered Phillips to prepare the customized wedding cakes on demand. And the Colorado courts agreed, leaving Phillips to petition the U.S. Supreme Court for relief.

The petition asked the court to consider “whether applying Colorado’s public accommodations law to compel Phillips to create expression that violates his sincerely held religious beliefs about marriage violates the Free Speech or Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment.” If the Court grappled fully with either of those questions, the result could have been a landmark decision. Kennedy and his colleagues could have ruled in favor of Colorado and the couple, thus removing the First Amendment as a shield against the advancement of same-sex-marriage rights and interests through neutrally worded anti-discrimination laws. Or they could have ruled broadly in favor of Phillips, thus blocking the use of those neutral anti-discrimination laws as a sword against traditional religious believers.

But those seemed to be questions on which the Court’s nine justices would probably be sharply divided—likely four on one side, four on the other, with Justice Kennedy in the middle. So the Court resolved the case on narrower grounds for which there was a substantial majority of justices in agreement. Instead of deciding whether the right to free exercise of religion in such expressive commercial contexts always trumps state anti-discrimination laws on the question of same-sex marriage, the Court held merely that this particular administrative proceeding violated Phillips’s constitutional free-exercise right. Why? Because the Commission’s decision seemed motivated, at least in part, by sheer animosity to religion.

“At several points during its meeting,” the Court explained, “commissioners endorsed the view that religious beliefs cannot legitimately be carried into the public sphere or commercial domain, implying that religious beliefs and persons are less than fully welcome in Colorado’s business community.” In one of the hearings on the Phillips case, a commissioner aimed an astonishingly hostile attack at Phillips’s religious motivation that none of her fellow commissioners disclaimed or disputed:

Freedom of religion and religion has been used to justify all kinds of discrimination throughout history, whether it be slavery, whether it be the Holocaust, whether it be—I mean, we—we can list hundreds of situations where freedom of religion has been used to justify discrimination. And to me it is one of the most despicable pieces of rhetoric that people can use to—to use their religion to hurt others.

This was too much for the Justices to abide, and the Court’s decision pivoted upon this. “To describe a man’s faith as ‘one of the most despicable pieces of
rhetoric that people can use’ is to disparage his religion in at least two distinct ways,” Kennedy’s majority opinion explained: “By describing it as despicable, and also by characterizing it as merely rhetorical…. This sentiment is inappropriate for a Commission charged with the solemn responsibility of fair and neutral enforcement of Colorado’s anti-discrimination law.”

The Court was also troubled by starkly different treatment that the commission afforded bakers who refused to bake cakes with messages critical of same-sex marriage.

Taking the Commission’s statements and disparate conduct together, the Court concluded that Colorado’s action against Phillips was unconstitutionally motivated by hostility toward his religious beliefs. “The Constitution ‘commits government itself to religious tolerance,’” the decision said, “and upon even slight suspicion that proposals for state intervention stem from animosity to religion or distrust of its practices, all officials must pause to remember their own high duty to the Constitution and to the rights it secures.” In this particular case, in light of the Colorado Commission’s actions and stated motivations, “the Commission’s consideration of Phillips’ case was neither tolerant nor respectful of his’ religious beliefs.”

And so the Court reversed the Colorado court’s decision affirming the state commission, but in so doing, the majority opinion took care to stress that its decision does not necessarily preclude states from applying anti-discrimination laws in a way that burdens the exercise of religion:

The outcome of cases like this in other circumstances must await further elaboration in the courts, all in the context of recognizing that their disputes must be resolved with tolerance, without undue disrespect to sincere religious beliefs, and without subjecting gay persons to indignities when they seek goods and services in an open market.

We can only imagine the number of justice-hours that went into crafting that paragraph to win the approval of seven justices. The triple negative—“without undue disrespect”—is particularly pregnant: Why not just “with due respect” for sincere religious beliefs? Indeed, is the Court implying that in the conflict between same-sex marriage and the exercise of traditional religion, there is such a thing as “due disrespect” for religious belief, and that it would be constitutionally permissible?

While the opinion was written by Kennedy, the

narrowness of the ruling and the breadth of justices joining it is a hallmark of Chief Justice Roberts’s tenure leading the Court. As Roberts explained to a Rice University audience in 2012, “I think the broader agreement you can get on the Court, the better. And the way you get to broader agreement is to have a narrower de-

In the conflict between same-sex marriage and the exercise of religion, is there such a thing as ‘due respect’ for religious belief?
maintain any meaningful viability, it will require federal and state courts to look beyond mere appearances.

When state officials punish businesses and people for conduct rooted in religious belief and reject the defendants’ invocation of the First Amendment as protecting their exercise of religion, the courts will need to look closely to ensure that the state officials are not actually motivated by anti-religious bias. Patterns of disparate treatment like that in *Masterpiece Cakeshop*, where a religious baker’s punishment stood in stark contrast to the liberty enjoyed by bakers of opposite beliefs, would speak louder than bureaucratic words.

But above all else, Kennedy’s opinion exemplifies the theme at the heart of all of his gay-rights opinions: the importance—indeed, the constitutional importance—of protecting vulnerable minorities from hostile, prejudiced majorities. Except that in this case, the vulnerable minority wasn’t a same-sex couple but a Christian baker.

First came 1996’s *Romer*. Then, in striking down Texas’s criminal statute against homosexual sodomy as an unconstitutional burden on personal liberty in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), Kennedy’s opinion stressed that the Court’s own prior acceptance of such laws “demeans the lives of homosexual persons.” Kennedy returned to these themes in *U.S. v. Windsor* (2013). He wrote the opinion for the Court against the constitutionality of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which had defined marriage, for purposes of federal law, exclusively in terms of the marriage of a man and a woman. “DOMA’s principal effect is to identify a subset of state-sanctioned marriages and make them unequal,” he wrote, and this “differentiation demeans the [same-sex] couple.” And so the Court declared DOMA unconstitutional, “for no legitimate purpose overcomes the purpose and effect to disparage and to injure” same-sex couples.

While nominally limiting his analysis to a federal law on marriage (a subject long governed primarily by the states), Kennedy’s opinion seemed to point clearly to the wrongness of state marriage laws. Prominent law professors encouraged him in this aim by attempting to tie his novel jurisprudence-of-dignity narrative back to well-respected Supreme Court precedents, especially *Brown v. Board of Education*. Bruce Ackerman’s *We the People: The Civil Rights Revolution* (2014) reframed the Court’s nullification of state-enforced racial segregation in terms of “the distinctive wrongness of institutionalized humiliation.” Of the *Windsor* case, Ackerman wrote, “Justice Kennedy’s opinion was simply a restatement of *Brown’s* anti-humiliation principle.” Ackerman was joined in this work by NYU’s Kenji Yoshino and others who attempted to map the “anti-humiliation principle” onto American constitutional law, building a case against traditional marriage constitutional law.

When the Court took the final step of declaring a constitutional right to same-sex marriage a year later, in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), Kennedy’s opinion for the Court yet again struck these chords: “There is dignity in the bond between two men or two women who seek to marry and in their autonomy to make such profound choices. ... They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”

Scholars declared victory and looked ahead to how this anti-humiliation principle might further be used against oppressive state and federal governments. Harvard’s Laurence Tribe argued that the anti-humiliation principle “signals the beginning of the end for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in areas like employment and housing.” Yoshino, in the prestigious “Foreword” essay opening the *Harvard Law Review*’s 2015–16 volume, declared that *Obergefell* heralds a “New Birth of Freedom,” perhaps reaching as far as reproductive rights. “Of course,” he added, “what counts as a ‘subordinated group’ will be up for debate.”

Indeed, it would be. Yoshino expressly held open the possibility that people forced to serve same-sex weddings, “such as the florist or restaurateur who does not wish to cater a gay wedding,” might indeed be a “subordinated group” claiming protection against government humiliation.

Too few progressives took this point seriously. It was an ironic oversight. Many of those who declare traditional religious views to be decreasingly popular in America, and who presume that religious believers are destined to become an irrelevant minority in American public life, fail to see that the very same trajectory could render traditional religious Americans to be the sort of discrete and insular minority that is at risk of oppression and—yes—“humiliation” at the hands of an energized majority. They would thus be precisely the sort of group that would receive heightened protection from the Court. Perhaps more proponents of same-sex marriage should have taken this point seriously. Perhaps Justice Kennedy’s opinion in *Masterpiece Cakeshop* will compel them to do so.

But at the same time, those who celebrate *Masterpiece Cakeshop* should pause and consider the implications of this path. Justice Kennedy worried this year about a state’s “undue disrespect to sincere religious beliefs.” More worrisome is what future judges might deem to be “due disrespect” for them.
The Great American Melt-Up

No, we’re not stagnated

By James Pethokoukis

Democrats find themselves in a state of confusion. Not only is there no clear favorite for the party’s 2020 presidential nomination, it’s uncertain what economic policies the party’s eventual nominee will put forward. Among the ideas currently being argued and discussed by progressive activists and wonks are free college tuition for all, expanding Medicare, heavily regulating or breaking up the big-tech platforms, and a universal basic income or jobs guarantee.

Yet wherever Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and whoever else might climb the greasy pole come down, they will likely agree on at least one thing: While Trump and tax-cutting Trumponomics may be the immediate target of their ire, they will also argue that the U.S. economy has been on the wrong track for decades. Forget Ronald Reagan’s famous question to voters in 1980, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” As Democrats see things, the American middle class is worse off than it was before Reagan took office. In their eyes, the pro-market tilt in U.S. economic policy since Reagan’s time—lower taxes, lighter regulation, freer trade—has resulted in little more than higher inequality, lower upward mobility, and middle-class income stagnation.

The claim is no longer even remotely controversial on the left and is frequently repeated by its politicians as an incontrovertible fact. This 2011 speech by Barack Obama is typical:

There is a certain crowd in Washington who, for the last few decades, have said, let’s respond to this economic challenge with the same old tune. “The market will take care of everything,” they tell us. If we just cut more regulations and cut more taxes—especially for the wealthy our economy will grow stronger.... But here’s the problem: It doesn’t work. It has

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never worked.... [Over] the last few decades, the rungs on the ladder of opportunity have grown farther and farther apart, and the middle class has shrunk.... This is about the nation’s welfare. It’s about making choices that benefit not just the people who’ve done fantastically well over the last few decades, but that benefit the middle class, and those fighting to get into the middle class, and the economy as a whole.

Or as Sanders summed it up at the 2016 Democratic National Convention: “This election is about ending the 40-year decline of our middle class.”

Interestingly, President Trump makes pretty much the same argument. As he said in his inaugural address: “For many decades, we’ve enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry. . . . The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world.”

And again in his 2017 joint address to Congress: “I will not allow the mistakes of recent decades past to define the course of our future. For too long, we’ve watched our middle class shrink as we’ve exported our jobs and wealth to foreign countries.”

Trump has never been a Reagan fan, particularly on trade. As he said in March at a rally for congressional candidate Rick Saccone, “I loved [Reagan’s] style, his attitude. He was a great cheerleader for the country. But not great on the trade.” And in 1991 he testified to Congress against the 1986 Reagan tax cuts, calling them an “absolute catastrophe for the country.”

It shouldn’t be surprising that Sanders and Trump agree on America’s supposed 40 years of economic woe. They’re both populists, and populists, whether in Venezuela or the United States, need to make a political case that goes beyond complaining about current circumstances. They must argue that the failure of the nation’s elites has been total, purposeful, and long-standing. The problem isn’t just Obamanomics, but Clintonomics, Bushonomics, and Reaganomics.

Economic facts, properly understood, simply do not support the argument that the broad American middle class has been stuck in neutral for nearly two generations. Now, it is true that Census data show real median incomes rising at an almost imperceptible 0.3 percent a year from the mid-1980s through 2013. At the same time, real per-person economic growth rose at a much quicker rate, nearly 2 percent a year. The difference between those figures reflects widening inequality. The rich got richer while others stayed relatively the same.

But only partisans think those numbers truly reflect the economic realities of the typical American family.

A University of Chicago poll of top economists found that 70 percent agreed with the proposition that the Census Bureau’s conclusion “substantially understates how much better off people in the median American household are now economically, compared with 35 years ago.” The economist Martin Feldstein, for instance, argues that the agency fails to take into account shrinking household size, the rise in government-benefit transfers, and changes in tax policy. It also measures inflation in a way many experts think overstates the actual rise in living costs. The Census Bureau uses the common consumer price index, but many economists favor something called the personal-consumption-expenditures price index, viewing it as a more reliable and comprehensive measure. And the PCE typically shows a lower inflation rate than the CPI.

One organization that does take all of this into account is the Congressional Budget Office. In March, CBO released a study that calculated much stronger gains for the broad middle class—which I’ll define here as the 21st to 80th income percentiles. One way to look at how that group is doing is by calculating “income before transfers and taxes”—roughly, market incomes plus social-insurance benefits such as Social Security and Medicare. Measured in this way, middle-class incomes rose 28 percent from 1980 through 2014. So this may not be blazing-fast growth, but it’s nearly five times larger than the number offered by the Census Bureau.

Then the CBO looked at “income after transfers and taxes”—market income plus social-insurance benefits plus means-tested transfers (Medicaid, food stamps) minus federal taxes. This more fully captures all the economic resources the American middle class commands. And it finds middle-class income in-
creased 42 percent since 1980. More impressive still: Incomes for the bottom fifth are up nearly 70 percent. This is not the stagnated America that the populists have been telling us about.

And remember, these numbers compare the middle class today with that of decades ago. But these are not the same families and households. A 2016 Urban Institute study by Stephen Rose found that 38 percent of American families in 1979 were middle class (defined as households earning between $50,000 and $100,000 annually, adjusted for inflation) vs. 32 percent in 2014. That sounds terrible. What happened to all those middle-class families?

The study divided households into five income groups: poor, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, and rich. Of those groups, the bottom three got smaller over the decades while the top two grew. The ranks of the poor shrank by 4.5 percentage points, the lower middle class by 6.8, the middle class also by 6.8 points. But the upper middle class got a lot bigger, expanding by 16.5 points, while the rich grew by 1.7 points. So what happened to the middle class? It disappeared because it got richer. There has not been a middle-class meltdown. There's been a melt-up.

CONFRONTED WITH these statistics about income, stagnationists tend to narrow the focus and say that what really counts is worker wages, good old-fashioned take-home pay. And they will often produce charts showing that the typical American worker makes no more than in 1975. But they are choosing the wrong inflation measure, which makes a tremendous difference when evaluating the true purchasing power of workers. A 2017 study by the Dartmouth economist Bruce Sacerdote, for instance, finds that real wages grew by at least 24 percent since the Ford administration, and perhaps much more. “Estimates of slow and steady growth seem more plausible than media headlines, which suggest that median American households face declining living standards,” Sacerdote concludes.

And that steady growth continues to allow most American to live the American Dream, if you define the Dream as each generation being wealthier than the one before. You would be forgiven for thinking this is not the case. Last year, the superstar economist Raj Chetty and his team made headlines with a study that compared the incomes of 30-year-olds starting in 1970 with the earnings of their parents at the same age. The researchers found that in 1970, 92 percent of American 30-year-olds earned more than their parents did at a similar age, versus just 51 percent in 2014. “The likelihood that young adults will earn more than their parents has plummeted”—that is how the Associated Press summarized the findings.

Yet this is really a worst-case interpretation of the data. Other economists raise issues concerning the study’s assumptions about inflation, the role of taxes and transfers, and whether looking at adult children at age 40 might have been more relevant than age 30 given that more Americans are starting their working life later than they did decades ago. Indeed, a follow-up analysis by researcher Scott Winship finds that “roughly three in four adults—and the overwhelming majority of poor children—live better off than their parents after taking the rising cost of living into account.”

But set the data aside for a moment. The idea that most Americans are worse off than they were in the 1970s seems intuitively nonsensical to those of us who were living back then. As former Obama economic adviser Jason Furman once put it: “Ignore the statistics for a second and use your common sense. Remember when even upper-middle-class families worried about staying on a long distance call for too long? When flying was an expensive luxury? When only a minority of the population had central air conditioning, dishwashers, and color televisions?”

Or look at smartphone ownership. Nearly 80 percent of Americans have amazing panes of glass in their pockets, something that didn’t exist in 1980 or 2000. How many of us would choose to live in a pre-smartphone era even with a substantially higher income? A thought experiment by Washington Post reporter Matt O’Brien neatly gets at the issue: “Adjusted for inflation, would you rather make $50,000 in today’s world or $100,000 in 1980’s? In other words, is an extra $50,000 enough to get you to give up the Internet and TV and computer that you have now? This might be the best way to get a sense of how much better technology has made our lives—not to mention the fact that people are living longer—the past 35 years.”
Of course the median or typical family isn’t every family or every person. Some groups, such as working-class men, may well have seen their living standard stagnate. And then there are the communities hurt by changes in world trade patterns that never really bounced back. But that is a narrower argument than the one the stagnationists are making—it’s not the 1-percent-versus-99-percent argument that progressives and populists have been making. Their point is that pro-market policies have failed for most Americans for two generations and are thus discredited. Or as Vice President Mike Pence has put it, “the free market has been sorting it out and America’s been losing.” Bernie Sanders couldn’t have said it better.

The populists of the left and right agree that America’s golden age was in the immediate postwar decades when taxes were high, unions were strong, and economic growth was rapid. It is against that period that populists judge the economy of more recent decades. But policymakers can’t just dial up the Wayback Machine and return to the supposed Baby Boomer paradise of the 1950s and 1960s. The post–World War II decades were affected by a host of unrepeatable factors, the most important of which was that America’s economic competitors were recovering after a global war. A National Bureau of Economic Research study described the situation this way: “At the end of World War II, the United States was the dominant industrial producer in the world,” at one point responsible for nearly 60 percent of the world’s output. “This was obviously a transitory situation.”

Not only have our competitors since recovered and thrived, but globalization has brought billions of new workers into the global labor market and raised their standards of living more rapidly than the world has ever seen. Fixating on the past and drawing the wrong lessons from economic history will only leave American workers ill-prepared to meet those challenges. And if that happens, the stagnationists of the populist left and right may finally be correct.
The Exuberant Joylessness of Philip Roth

The brilliant and problematic work of a Jewish writer who didn’t want to be one

By Ruth R. Wisse

The first fan letter I ever wrote was to Philip Roth in 1959 after reading Goodbye, Columbus. I was not in the habit of complimenting writers, not Saul Bellow for The Adventures of Augie March, or Herman Wouk for Marjorie Morningstar, or even Leon Uris for Exodus. I was then between college and graduate school, aspiring to be Virginia Woolf’s ideal reader, and I was teaching myself to distinguish between good writing (Bellow’s) and what my favorite professor called “push-button” prose (Uris’s).

But reading Roth’s stories, I was beyond caring whether this was a “critical” or merely “commercial” success. I felt these stories were written, if not for me alone, then close enough—for someone about my age with the same disdain for the bourgeois limitations of Jewish life and the organized Jewish community. At the time, I shared some of those attitudes and thus identified almost completely with the Roth stand-in in most of the stories. And though I have since then learned to love much of what I once distrusted, I remain thankful for the freedom to identify with the male narrator, since no one had yet told me I was expected as a female to identify only with other females in literature—with Miriam rather than Moses! Happily, I came of age before Women’s Lib tried to pen me in.

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Roth’s title story transcribed in credible dialogue the summer romance of clever Neil Klugman (klug is Yiddish for clever) with Brenda Patimkin, whose family had already moved from Newark, where Neil still lives with his aunt, to more prosperous Short Hills. This was the familiar adventure of a boy attracted erotically and economically to the girl who would satisfy both sets of his ambitions but who is upended by her bourgeois scruples. The erotic part of the plot centers on his demand that she facilitate their sex by getting a diaphragm from the Margaret Sanger Clinic, and the economic part, on preparations for the wedding of Brenda’s older brother Ron in the kind of merger-marriage the family expects. Rather than pursue his real ambition of becoming a gym instructor, Ron is headed for the family business—Patimkin Kitchen and Bathroom Sinks, located “in the heart of the Negro section of Newark.” I would have paid greater attention than I did to the sociology of the novella had I realized that this would remain Roth territory over his lifetime.

The mature Philip Roth was not proud of this debut collection, and I am likewise a little embarrassed to admit the almost unreserved admiration I felt for all its six stories and the title one in particular. I laughed at the preliminary exchanges between the sparring couple (“What do you look like?” “I’m…dark.” “Are you a Negro?”), and at the portrait of the Hadassah-member mother who asks about Martin Buber, “Is he orthodox or conservative?” I thought brilliantly funny the scene in which Ron plays his record of “Goodbye, Columbus” that turns out to be a transcript of the final game of his football career at Ohio State. Columbus—get it? I especially fancied Neil’s discovery in the basement of Brenda’s wealthy home the family’s old Newark refrigerator that had once stocked butter, eggs, and herring in cream sauce but was now heaped with fruit, shelves swelled with it, every color, every texture, and hidden within, every kind of pit.

It was one thing to play the more genuine or honest Jew against phonies, but it was phoniness itself to make a comparison between crass Jews and the allegedly more genuine and honest non-Jews.
The corrupted Jew/untainted non-Jew dichotomy seemed to me not only dumb, but trite. That same year, 1959, in Montreal where I lived, there appeared Mordecai Richler’s *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. It was a novel uncommonly similar in its cultural assumptions, though whereas Neil Klugman is the sympathetic alternative to the smug Jews of New Jersey, Duddy Kravitz is himself the Jew who aspires to acquire—in his case, land. Roth’s satire of the Patimkin wedding has its comic parallel in Richler’s parody of a crass bar mitzvah, and both works assume that Jews sacrifice their souls in their climb from immigrant poverty into what passes for security. The only characters capable of true affection and loyalty in Richler’s plot are a French-Canadian young woman and a Gentile epileptic, both of whom he betrays. Duddy Kravitz was a knock-off of Budd Schulberg’s Sammy Glick in *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1952), who scrambles over people in his climb from New York’s Lower East Side to Hollywood. That was preceded, in turn, by Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917)…and along the way there was plenty of fiction of varying artistic quality featuring similarly avaricious members of the tribe. I appreciated the wonderfully rendered cliché of the Jewish nouveaux-riche Patimkins but less so the redemptive Gentile as “heart” instructor of the uglier Jew.

Philip Roth was in no permanent danger of yielding to that cliché. Rather than follow up *Goodbye, Columbus* with books in the same vein, he moved away from Jews and tried his hand at more conventional American subjects and literary approaches. Maybe because I read his next novels, *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*, mostly out of duty, I felt that he had *written* them dutifully to prove himself master of American fiction and not just its Jewish precincts. But for that I didn’t need Roth and could have gone straight to Henry James. Then something happened. On an overnight trip to New York in 1967, I stayed with Montreal expatriates who suggested we invite another friend to join us for dinner. Our friend agreed to come on condition that we let him bring a new story he had just discovered. He insisted on reading us—aloud and in company!—“The Jewish Blues” from the first issue of a paperback magazine called *New American Review*. We laughed harder than we ever had (maybe ever would again) at this shpritz of stand-up comedy delivered from a horizontal position. “The Jewish Blues” became the third chapter of *Portnoy’s Complaint*.

Written as a series of monologues that form six psychoanalytic sessions, *Portnoy’s Complaint* was built entirely on clichés—the Jewish son with an Oedipal complex, the vociferous mother and constipated father, Freudian analysis with a Viennese refugee, the Jew’s sexual attraction to the Gentile shiksa and corresponding fear of the assertive Jewish woman. But because joking depends on a shared cultural vocabulary, Roth’s recourse to the clichés of American Jewish culture were in this case justified and, indeed, indispensable to the comedy’s success.

Freud had explained it all in his study of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, leaving comic writers to combine as they saw fit the features of joking that he identified, such as condensation, double entendre, displacement, faulty reasoning, etc., for purposes ranging from pleasure to aggression. Freud poignantly explains the need for this irreverence: “What these jokes whisper may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality.” Civilized adults may be forgiven for using comedy to bring release from taboos they must continue to observe. When Alex Portnoy says, “I am the son in the Jewish joke—Only it ain’t no joke!” the comedy exposes the distress that laughter only momentarily relieves.

Once the laughter subsided, a number of questions arose: Did the joking of insiders suit a general public? And did *Portnoy’s Complaint* really break taboos, or did it exploit a cultural shift that had already set in? On the sex front, Roth was barely keeping up with the times.

**Did the joking of insiders suit a general public? And did *Portnoy’s Complaint* really break taboos, or did it exploit a cultural shift that had already set in? On the sex front, Roth was barely keeping up with the times.**
adultery. The impression of repression made for the comic release.

As I saw it, the real risks Roth took were not orgiastic or onanistic—but lay elsewhere, mainly in his satire of Christians. Alex’s father is speaking:

“They worship a Jew, do you know that, Alex? Their whole big-deal religion is based on worshiping someone who was an established Jew at that time. Now how do you like that for stupidity? How do you like that for pulling the wool over the eyes of the public? Jesus Christ, who they go around telling everybody was a God, was actually a Jew! And this fact, that absolutely kills me when I have to think about it, nobody else pays any attention to. That he was a Jew, like you and me, and that they took a Jew and turned him into some kind of God after he is already dead, and then—and this is what can make you absolutely crazy—then the dirty bastards turn around afterwards, and who is the first one on their list to persecute? Who haven’t they left their hands off of to murder and to hate for two thousand years? The Jews!”

This eruption is accounted for by the parents’ years of kowtowing to bigoted employers, but Alex is even more offensive than his father when he notices a picture of Jesus floating up to Heaven “in a pink nightgown” in the home of a girl he is trying to seduce:

The Jews I despise for their narrow-mindedness, their self-righteousness, the incredibly bizarre sense that these cave men who are my parents and relatives have somehow gotten of their superiority—but when it comes to tawdriness and cheapness, to beliefs that would shame even a gorilla, you simply cannot top the goyim. What kind of base and brainless schmucks are these people to worship somebody who, number one, never existed, and number two, if he did, looking as he does in that picture, was without a doubt The Pansy of Palestine....

Rereading this book (as I have done more than once), I wondered whether the narrator’s assaults on Jews and on himself were not the excuse for attacks on Gentiles and on Christians specifically. In the past, Jews who lived as a minority among Gentiles—and at their mercy—reasonably refrained from aggressively against their hosts. In hostile or potentially hostile societies, Jewish boys were discouraged from fighting back lest it bring on collective retribution. For the same reasons, Jews held back as well from verbal insult, and this prohibition burrowed deep into the culture. Roth violated this taboo, feeling sufficiently at home in America not to have such concerns about offending the goyim and probably realizing that, as with sex, what was once forbidden was now becoming all the rage.

As he anticipated, those truly offended by Portnoy were not Christians but Jews. Criticism came from some of the distinguished Jewish elders of the day, like Marie Syrkin in New York and Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem—intellectuals who had borne the full weight of anti-Semitism a mere two decades earlier and who now feared the consequence of Roth’s Jewish impropriety. Syrkin saw the leering Nazi-style anti-Jewish stereotype behind Roth’s Jewish joking. A little like the chief rabbi of Moscow who is reported to have warned in 1919, “Trotsky makes the revolutions, and the Bronsteins pay the bills,” Scholem thought that by trotting out every negative stereotype of the Jew, this self-styled “American writer” was actually stoking a new anti-Semitism. Trotsky had quit the Jews by changing his name from Bronstein, but just as the Moscow rabbi warned that Jews would be charged for his deeds, so Scholem wondered “what price the world Jewish community is going to pay for this book.” A second tier of criticism from American rabbis and Jewish organizational leaders protested Roth’s negative portrayal of the Jewish way of life, and from reviewers there were objections to the book’s alleged lack of artistic merit.

Against all these charges, I sided with Roth. In the late 1960s, Jews had reason to believe that there was little danger of triggering anti-Semitism in America: Jews were then at the height of their popularity. Liberal sympathy for Holocaust victims was unadulterated by fear of having to absorb Jewish refugees, now that Israel was there to absorb them. Paul New-
man had strode the screen like a colossus as Ari Ben Canaan in Otto Preminger's film *Exodus*, based on the Leon Uris bestseller, projecting Israel's new image of masculine competence. Moreover, Judaism was by then enshrined as one of America's three religions—Protestant, Catholic, Jew—sharing their fate, for better and worse, including as targets of satire. Roth's debut coincided with the Jewish moment in American culture, and he proved it by eventually surpassing all other Jewish American novelists in popularity. By raising the specter of anti-Semitism, Roth's anachronistic critics made Roth seem all the more up-to-date.

I was in no greater sympathy with those who expected Roth to be "fair" to the Jewish community. We were by then a small army of college-graduated Jews who had been trained to differentiate advertising from literature, and to reject the notion of any writerly loyalty other than to writing itself. When accused of misrepresenting the Jews, Roth responded in this magazine with an imagined list of similar complaints that might have been leveled at other authors, e.g., to Fyodor Dostoevsky for the portrait of Raskolnikov: "All the students in our school, and most of the teachers, feel that you have been unfair to us...." 'Dear Mark Twain—None of the slaves on our plantation has ever run away. But what will our owner think when he reads of Nigger Jim?' 'Dear Vladimir Nabokov—The girls in our class..."' When it came to defending artistic independence, Roth was clearly able to hold his own.

The more vexing question of *Portnoy's Complaint* literary merit was raised most cogently by Irving Howe—in this magazine in 1972. As the literary critic who defined the New York intellectuals (also in this magazine), Howe seemed to be speaking for his intellectual cohort when he quotably wrote, "The cruellest thing anyone can do with *Portnoy's Complaint* is to read it twice." He then cruelly tried to substantiate his claim. Nonetheless, Howe managed to inflate the book's impact while depreciating its value by calling the novel a "cultural document of some importance," claiming that younger Jews took it as a signal for abandoning their Jewishness while some Gentile readers took it as sign that Jews were no better than anyone else:

[They] could almost be heard breathing a sigh of relief, for it signaled an end to philo-Semitism in American culture, one no longer had to listen to all that talk about Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families. Here was Philip Roth himself, a writer who even seemed to know Yiddish, confirming what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to say.

Was it not praising with faint damn to credit Roth with having changed the direction of American culture? And why should Howe be more distressed than the rabbis? This panning could only help further stoke the image of Roth as a bold, renegade Jewish writer.

Roth later got his own back in a recognizable caricature of his critic (as Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson*), but this was more than a personal feud. The book and the controversy it stirred marked a shift in American Jewish culture—a generational one. Howe, like Roth, had once rebelled against Jewish observance and like him, too, had married "outside the faith," but by the time he wrote this review essay, he had created anthologies of Yiddish literature and had retrieved his heritage in *World of Our Fathers*, a cultural history of the Jewish immigrant experience.

Howe's generation was saturated with old-world Jewishness. Delmore Schwartz could evoke the Jewish intonations of a mother's speech. Isaac Rosenfeld wrote some of his stories in Yiddish. Joseph Dorman's film *Arguing the World*, takes Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer back to their immigrant neighborhoods and probes their attachments to their Jewish upbringing. While Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud are often linked with Roth in a triumvirate of Jewish writers, there is actually a world of difference between the older writers and Philip Roth.
it contains plenty of contempt for Jewish life. Nor does Roth write out of traditional Jewish self-hatred, for the true agent of such self-hatred is always indissolubly linked with Jewish past and present, quite as closely as those who find in Jewishness moral or transcendent sanctions. What the book speaks for is a yearning to undo the fate of birth; there is no wish to do the Jews any harm (a little nastiness is something else), nor any desire to engage with them as a fevered antagonist; Portnoy is simply crying out to be left alone, to be released from the claims of distinctiveness and the burdens of the past, so that, out of his own nothingness, he may create himself as a “human being.” Who, born a Jew in the 20th century, has been so lofty in spirit never to have shared this fantasy? But who, born a Jew in the 20th century, has been so foolish in mind as to dally with it for more than a moment?

It was impossible for Roth to recover what he never had, but Howe accused him of embracing the hollowness of what American Jewish life had become rather than trying to fill it.

This cultural shift also had a political undercurrent. Some of the New York intellectuals had undergone a political transformation from left-tending liberalism to neoconservatism. Having started out on the left, they understood its dangerous attractions and the corresponding need to protect American freedoms. Once opposed or indifferent to Zionism for its national backsliding from the international ideal, they discovered Israel and accepted responsibility for its defense. They were not all Cold Warriors to the same degree, but they wanted to bring down the Soviet Union. They were shocked by the radical assault on elite universities where some of them were now privileged to teach. Their disquiet intensified as protest against the war in Vietnam morphed into an attack on Western civilization. Though Howe continued to call himself a socialist, he was like the others culturally conservative, and he associated Roth with the radical impulse. He decried Roth for his vulgarity, by which he means not the scatology or descriptions of masturbation but “the impulse to submit the rich substance of human experience, sentiment, value, and aspiration to a radically reductive leveling or simplification.” In Howe’s judgment, Portnoy’s Complaint violated the standards of civilizing refinement that the older Jewish intellectuals were trying to uphold.

My political sympathies were generally with the New York intellectuals—but the book made me laugh. I was learning to trust my own response when it contradicted that of my literary betters, and my artless reaction to Roth’s novel made me ready to defend him from Howe’s critique. I thought Howe had missed the whole point of the comedy: Laughter would explode the clichés of American Jewish culture, including the image of the arrested adolescent who was passing himself off as the typical Jewish male. Laughter was a therapeutic purge, part indictment, part confession, with curative potential. Portnoy’s mock-analysis culminates in the punch line: “So [said the doctor] Now vee may perhaps begin. Yes?” This was both part of the comedy and its resolution. Alex was about to rise from the couch a somewhat steadied Jewish American male capable of love and happiness, as donor and recipient. I saw this work as a signpost on the road to the cultural and political maturity that the neoconservatives had already reached, and I expected Portnoy’s creator, the original klug man, to move on.

Was I right?

IRVING HOWE was proved spectacularly wrong in his assessment of Roth’s literary powers. Endlessly inventive, Roth may have bombed with the works that came in the immediate wake of Portnoy, but the creation of Nathan Zuckerman as a Roth stand-in served him for eight full novels.
intensity of his writing. From book to book one never knew what to expect, so I acquired and read almost all of them.

It is harder to confront Roth’s effect on American Jewry. As said, no other American writer was ever so closely associated with Jewish subjects and a Jewish readership, nor can one imagine Roth successful without them. Yet the attachment had not been his idea. When Roth’s designated biographer, Blake Bailey, said recently, “The Jewish thing was really what informed Philip as a writer,” he then noted that the credit really went to George Starbuck, Roth’s first editor, who had been given a longer manuscript and discarded all but the stories with Jewish themes. Starbuck made the shrewd decision that *Goodbye, Columbus* would be about Jewish life in America at the time when Jews were all the rage. Roth said, “In many ways, George formed my career, because I didn’t know that I was a Jewish writer.” It was a shotgun wedding, not unlike Roth’s unhappy first marriage to Margaret Martinson, from which he was released by her death. He could not quit the Jewish union, however, without giving up the dowry of fame it had brought him, so he stayed to the end in the cheerless marriage.

Roth’s denial of meaningful Jewish attachment remained an essential feature of his writing, complicated by the lack of alternative, for he disliked Christianity even more than being a Jew. There does not seem to me a complex of values or aspirations or beliefs that continue to connect one Jew to another in our country, but rather an ancient and powerful disbelief, which, if it is not fashionable or wise to assert in public, is no less powerful for being underground: that is, the rejection of the myth of Jesus as Christ....And wherein my fellow Jews reject Jesus as the supernatural envoy of God, I feel a kinship with them.

Needless to say, this form of kinship is not a basis for any true affection. He then goes on to deny any other form of religious or cultural cohesion so that “we are bound together, I to my fellow Jews, my fellow Jews to me, in a relationship that is peculiarly enervating and unviable. Our rejection, our abhorrence finally, of the Christian fantasy leads us to proclaim to the world that we are Jews still—alone, however, what have we to proclaim to one another?”

It is one thing to nurse such a paltry idea of the Jewish people but much more troubling to use it as the basis of a literary career. Roth’s rejection of faith is the kind that many Jews admit to at the start of their cog-
to Roth because by the turn of the century anti-Semitism was once again on the rise in America, but he re-created an obsolete scenario instead of the real one. As had already been obvious for decades, the new aggression against the Jews originated in the Arab war against the Jewish state and had been couched since the 1960s in the slogans of Soviet anti-Zionism. The Zionism-racism accusation, pushed through by the Soviet-Arab axis at the United Nations, penetrated the United States from the left just as German-Nazi propaganda had once done from the right. The aggression had flipped political sides. Casting Palestinians as victims of Israeli imperialism and appropriating for them the role of refugee victim, a coalition of grievance and blame made common cause against Israel and against American Jews who supported their homeland. Rather than deal with this new threat, Roth retreated to his childhood politically, to take on the familiar Nazi bogeyman and refight the war that American troops had already won. He misidentified the target.

Fortunately, there were also times when Roth was able to fashion aspects of his “peculiarly enervating and unviable” relation to the Jews into masterworks. He did this by returning as Nathan Zuckerman to the familiar Newark of his childhood to treat as tragedy the spiritual hollow he had once subjected to satire. *American Pastoral* (1997) looks at Seymour “Swede” Levov, a fleshed-out version of Ron Patimkin, who innocently pursues and apparently achieves his idea of American success. The handsome Jewish Sports Hero marries the Gentile Beauty Queen, wins his reluctant father’s approval for the union, and settles down with his wife in the suburban paradise of Rimrock. A century earlier, Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote *The Possessed* to probe the emergence of Russia’s intellectual mercenaries, and Roth uses this unlikely setting to do the same for the American radicals of the late 1960s.

Meredith Levov...the “Rimrock Bomber” was Seymour Levov’s daughter. The high school kid who blew up the post office and killed the doctor. The kid who stopped the war in Vietnam by blowing up somebody out mailing a letter at five a.m. A doctor on his way to the hospital...

The Swede’s younger brother updates Zuckerman, his high-school classmate, who then searches out and brings us the full story: How could a good man like Seymour Levov, living out his version of paradise, breed a monster? But he does. Of course this embrace of violence in the name of salvation was not strictly a Jewish issue, but Roth showed privileged insight into how the escape from Jewishness formed part of it.

Roth attempted something on the same scale three years later in *The Human Stain*. The main setting is a New England College where Zuckerman has befriended one of the deans, the Jewish professor Coleman Silk, who is spuriously accused of insulting African-American students by using the term “spooks” to describe their ghostly disappearance from his class. In the ensuing purge, Silk is revealed to be a light-skinned African-American who, when he decided to pass, did so as a Jew, until then—at least outwardly—successfully. Roth manages to break out of his constraints as a Jewish writer through the story of an African American who is breaking out of his constraints as a black man, and in the process inevitably damages his family and himself in ways that Seymour Levov unwittingly does in Rimrock. Roth avoided the charge of political incorrectness that he would have incurred as a writer had he written about a Jewish professor by casting accusers and offender as black-on-black rather than black-on-Jew. Roth was careful never to offend the liberal hand that fed him even as he took on hot topics. He was shrewd as well as smart.

THROUGH THIS ENTIRE CAREER studded with prizes and fame, Roth never graciously accepted his designation as a Jewish writer, much less any implicit responsibility or affinity for the Jews or Israel. Whom was he denying? A sad feature of his life as a writer is that in never pretending to feel anything for the Jewish God, the Jewish homeland, or the Jewish people, Roth could not luxuriate in the affection and gratitude that many readers accorded him. At the heart of his fiction, hence of his standing as a writer, is distrust of Jewishness and secondarily of America as home to that Jewishness. Cold kasha. Adverse relation to one’s habitual subjects is not the best recipe for great art, and Roth did as well with it as any-

Roth avoided the charge of political incorrectness that he would have incurred had he written about a Jewish professor by casting accusers and offender as black-on-black rather than black-on-Jew.
one could, but I wish that after *Portnoy* if not before, he could have reached the threshold of love.

With the sadness that attended Roth’s retirement from writing in 2012 and his death in 2018 came the realization that his work was never joyful. Funny and witty certainly, vital and intelligent always, and highly entertaining, but never plainly happy in the way a well-matched bride and groom enchant family and guests at their wedding. I was startled to find in the essay quoted above that Irving Howe calls him “an exceedingly joyless writer, even when being very funny.” He saw this before I did.

Here is the Russian Jewish short-story master Isaac Babel (1894–1940) on Odessa, the “Newark” of his childhood:

If you think about it, [Odessa] is a town in which you can live free and easy. Half the population is made up of Jews, and Jews are a people who have learned a few simple truths along the way. Jews get married so as not to be alone, love so as to live through the centuries, hoard money so they can buy houses and give their wives astrakhan jackets, love children because, let’s face it, it is good and important to love one’s children.

Babel loved the Jews for what they were, the enjoyment of bourgeois pleasures being the best of their qualities. Babel loved being who he was despite the heavy price it exacted. Although he was first silenced and then tortured and killed at Stalin’s command, his work breathes happiness and joy. (With due respect for the difference, one thinks back to the legends of Rabbi Akiva that wrest laughter and joy from the great Destruction.) How is it that the modern Jewish writer who functioned under the most aversive moral and physical conditions should have cast himself as the harbinger of sunshine in Russian literature, whereas the novelist who benefited beyond all others from America’s freedom and opportunity should have put so little of its pleasures into his writing?

It might have been because Roth could never bring himself to say, “Damn right, America—I’m your Jewish writer, and thank you for letting me be proud of it!”

Commentary
How to Combat the Left’s ‘Alternative’ Israel Brainwashing

My time among the propagandists

By Ardie Geldman

EXCLUDING drive-time traffic, a car ride from the southern end of Jerusalem to the West Bank community of Efrat takes about 15 minutes. One travels along Israel’s Route 60 on the segment known as the “Tunnels Road” because its construction necessitated the first two tunnels in Israel to be cut through mountainside. The road was opened in 1996 to let commuters bypass the Arab towns of Bethlehem and Beit Jala, but mostly to avoid the Deheisha refugee camp. Cars driving on this road displaying yellow Israeli license plates had often been the targets of rocks and occasionally Molotov cocktails and gunfire.

Efrat’s first homeowners moved into the suburban hilltop community in April 1983. Starting with 50 families, some 250 souls, Efrat has since developed into a full-fledged, independent municipality whose current populace is about 12,000. Its master plan, approved by an Israeli Labor government during the mid-1970s, foresees a total population of 30,000. Efrat boasts a number of highly rated schools, a large and active community center, a well-used multilingual public library, sports fields and playgrounds, shopping centers, a soon-to-be completed shopping mall with underground parking, a plethora of medical clinics, and numerous synagogues (to date all Orthodox)—in short, pretty much every type of institution or facility that makes a town a town.

Ardie Geldman lives in Efrat and is the founder and director of iTalkIsrael.
The view from Efrat is pastoral, even bibli-cal. Local Arab shepherds daily guide their flocks of sheep and goats across the abutting highways and past adjoining vineyards. Some of these vines were planted only in the early 1980s by residents of nearby El Khadar on empty unclaimed fields in a failed ef-fort to thwart the first stages of Efrat’s construction. In late spring and summer, the green vineyards carpet the valleys that form the floor below the surrounding southern Judean hills. Along some of these hilltops lie the homes of Efrat, with their distinctive burnt-orange tiled roofs.

Another thing about Efrat. Its proximity to Je-rusalem and several Palestinian Authority towns has facilitated its becoming a popular destination for politically themed visits, part of a larger industry known as alternative tourism. This refers to visits by foreign-ers, often self-described “social-justice warriors,” tour-ing conflict areas in different parts of the world. They come to observe circumstances on the ground, to meet the actors, and to learn about the local history. Some arrive with more activist agendas.

I began meeting with foreign tourists in Efrat in 1990 during my term as an elected member of the Efrat town council. Initially the groups with whom I met were exclusively Jewish, mostly Americans who were curious to visit a new Israeli “settlement,” and Efrat, as noted, was easily accessible to tourists staying in Jeru-salem hotels. The ruefulness expressed in more recent years by many American Jews outside of the Orthodox community regarding the presence of Jews living in Judea and Samaria hardly existed in those days. To the contrary, I remember the pride expressed by Jewish visitors to Efrat who were impressed by what they saw.

Following the September 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the newly formed Pal-estinian Authority, the first step in a process intended, among other things, to reduce violence in the region, Israel experienced a wave of terrorist attacks, mainly suicide bombings in different parts of the country, result-ing in a precipitous decline in the number of Amer-ican Jewish tourists.

During this period, I received a phone call from a tour guide based in the nearby Arab town Beit Sa-hour. He had heard that I met with overseas visitors and wanted to know if I would meet with a group of Australian tourists. With no little naiveté on my part, and having become comfortable with discussing the Is-raeli–Palestinian conflict with mostly uncritical Jewish groups, I agreed. To my chagrin, when the group arrived in Efrat, following an initial exchange of pleasantries, I found myself the target of a volley of contentious ques-tions from these non-Jewish visitors. Why would I build my house on other people’s land? Why was the travel of all Palestinians being restricted? Why do Israeli soldiers shoot live bullets at Palestinian children?

The continuation of violence resulted in Jewish tourist groups refusing to travel beyond the 1949 armi-stice line out of fear, even though most of the terror-ism was taking place within Israel proper. During the years of the second intifada (2000—2004), American Jewish tourism virtually disappeared. Many Christian groups, however, continued coming. Over time, word of my willingness to meet with pro-Palestinian foreign groups spread, Efrat became the default “illegal settle-ment” to visit, and I became somewhat of a go-to set-tler for dozens of Christian and secular human-rights cum social-justice groups mostly from North America and Western Europe.

Over the years, using the name “iTalkIsrael,” I have spoken to thousands of tourists in Efrat. This ac-tivity is part of the broader burgeoning field of Israel advocacy, Israel probably being the only sovereign na-tion-state in the world in need of such championship to defend its existence. Unlike most others working in this field, I strive not to preach to the converted. The overwhelming majority of people with whom I meet do not try to hide their pro-Palestinian sympathies. Why, I am often asked, do these people come to Efrat? Undoubtedly they come for a variety of reasons. The most common, I believe, is curiosity.

American visitors generally have some Chris-tian affiliation, though this varies from high church to Quakers, Mennonites, and some nonaffiliated congre-gations. Western Europeans coming from France, Ger-many, Belgium, England, and Ireland are less likely to self-identify as Christians, though many acknowledge being raised in Christian homes.

The groups I meet range in age from as young as high school to senior adults, including some of mixed generations. College-age groups are common. I am a Baby Boomer who was politically aware and active on
These students’ purpose was neither to listen nor to learn. They had descended into the belly of the beast on a mission to deliver a message. Wherein lay the source of their animus?

the campus of Northwestern University at the height of America’s entanglement in Vietnam. During that era, for all but a minority of the student body, it was a given that “Nixon’s War” was unjust and wrong.

And so it is today with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The foreign students with whom I meet in Efrat universally view the Palestinians as the oppressed and Israel as their oppressor. This is consistent with the results of a Pew Research Center survey from May 2017 cited by the New York Times that indicates the Palestinian cause is rapidly gaining support among American university students while support for Israel is eroding.

One outstanding example is a recent visit by a group of undergraduates from Boston College. Their coming to Efrat, as is often the case, was but a short stopover within their extended itinerary. The students’ keener interests lay elsewhere as their time in the region was mostly devoted to meeting with Palestinians, especially activists, and with Israeli Jews on the far political left. They came to Efrat to witness “an illegal Israeli settlement occupying stolen Palestinian land” and for the opportunity to meet an “illegal settler.”

Their short time in Efrat, if approached differently, could have been an educational opportunity to better understand the other position framing the Israeli–Palestinian conundrum, the position with which these students were less familiar. My potential contribution lay in a perspective that came from living in Efrat for nearly 33 years. Time and propinquity have by default granted me insight into some of the complexities and nuances of this conflict that are unattainable in any other way.

In addition to observing and writing about this topic, I meet with hundreds of visitors each year. These students’ seminar on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict began in Boston with classroom studies followed by a mandatory 10-day overseas field visit. Their stop in Efrat lay somewhere in the middle of their schedule. After finding seats in the synagogue, the students waited until the completion of my introduction and my request for their questions. They then responded. Their questions and the tone in which they were presented were accusatory and antagonistic to the point of hostility. It seemed as if this group had arrived with a prepared, even scripted, agenda. The issues they raised were drawn from the familiar litany of Palestinian calumnies against Israel and settlers. Among them:

“Does providing security for your settlement require the IDF to arrest and torture seven-year-old Palestinian children?”

“What would you say to a Palestinian whose home is being demolished in order to make way for a new Israeli settlement?”

“We spent time with Palestinian families who say they often have no water because of Israel. Why does Israel steal water from Palestinians?”

The feeling in the room was akin to a combined cross-examination and indictment where both Israel and I were on trial. This was not the Q&A of any conventional academic setting. These students’ purpose in coming to Efrat was neither to listen nor to learn. They had descended into the belly of the beast on a mission to deliver a message. Wherein lay the source of their animus?

Their hostility may be presumed to have been the product of a combination of sources: the bias of their classroom lectures, the partisan readings they had been assigned, and the politically skewed experiences of their tour up to that point.* Their course, Sociology 3367, “Human Rights and Social Justice in Israel & Palestine,” is taught by Boston College Associate Professor Eve Spangler. Spangler is an outspoken and inveterate pro-Palestinian-rights activist. Outside of class she serves as a faculty adviser and a speaker for the campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, and she promotes the BDS movement. Spangler is also a founding board member of American Jews for a Just Peace and lectures for Jewish Voices for Peace, two radical political groups at the far-left margins of the American Jewish community.

Sociology 3367, according to the course syllabus, “is designed to prepare students to better understand the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.” Students are advised that the course is presented through a “human rights framework.” It is intended “to test [the students’] capacity for using their education to serve the world…. The course is an opportunity to explore the possibility of making history.”

* It is probable that some of the students chose the course because of their existing pro-Palestinian bias, a prejudice then strengthened by their classroom experience and study tour.
The 10-day itinerary clearly reveals the tour’s ideological purpose. It is mainly dedicated to meetings with Palestinian speakers or with Israelis on the far political left.

In describing the course’s higher purpose, the syllabus casually integrates incendiary words and phrases such as “apartheid,” “genocide,” and “ethnic cleansing/sociocide,” subtly attributing all these evils to the state of Israel. The syllabus further states that the students will be “bearing witness—to the sufferings and resilience of occupied communities and the courage and wisdom of dissidents,” a barely veiled reference to Palestinians living under Israeli authority. Such emotionally charged and partisan language belongs to the lexicon of the far left and its repertoire of accusations against the Jewish state. Introducing these terms into the course syllabus is a clear signal to students as to the political views of the professor.

In an ostensible show of academic balance, the course’s readings are authored by both Palestinians and Israelis. While it is to be expected that Palestinian authors write from a Palestinian perspective, anyone familiar with the literature on this topic will immediately recognize that the Israeli authors chosen by Spangler are all leftist academicians such as Morris*, Pappe, Segev, Rogan and Shlaim, Kimmerling and Migdal, who also promulgate the Palestinian narrative. Some, such as Pappe and Shlaim, have even denounced Israel and have taken academic positions elsewhere. This is intellectual obfuscation at its best.

How does one not wince at the statement found in the syllabus: “Academic integrity is a standard of utmost importance in this class”?

Spangler also heads the fact-finding “Israel/Palestine” trip. The professed purpose of this tour is to enhance the students’ classroom readings and discussions with an opportunity to study the conflict through on-site observation and meetings with both Israeli and Palestinian players. To facilitate the educational content and logistics, Spangler turned to the Siraj Center, a Palestinian travel agency located in Beit Sahour, adjacent to Bethlehem; no Israeli agency is credited in the planning. The Siraj Center is a successful vendor of “alternative tours” whose stated objective is to make tourists “more aware of the situation in Palestine.” Although this visit is described by the course syllabus as “an immersion trip to Israel/Palestine,” nowhere on the trip’s itinerary does one find “Israel.”

The 10-day itinerary clearly reveals the tour’s ideological purpose. It is mainly dedicated to meetings with Palestinian speakers or with Israelis on the far political left who champion Palestinian nationalism even as they challenge the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism. The three exceptions are a visit to Yad VaShem (Israel’s National Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem), the stopover in Efrat, and another short visit to the southern Israel border town of Sderot. These are the sole opportunities afforded the students to hear Israeli voices, be they Jewish or Arab, that do not emanate from the extreme left. But even visits to Yad Vashem have been exploited by some to serve the Palestinian narrative. Some anti-Zionist Israeli tour guides, Jews and Arabs, use the museum’s horrific scenes to liken the present circumstances of the Palestinians to the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis.

Almost everywhere they traveled, the students were guaranteed to receive an earful of anti-Zionist rhetoric. The roster of speakers and sites included:

- Sahar Vardi, a spokesperson for the Friends Service Committee’s Israel program in eastern Jerusalem, who served three prison sentences for her refusal to be conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces;
- OCHA, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a United Nations relief organization that functions as a major public relations organ promoting Palestinian interests;
- Mahmoud Abu Eid, a prominent Palestinian journalist and critic of Israel; a tour of the city of Hebron from the Palestinian perspective;
- Tent of Nations, a small plot of land developed as an environmental farm located in the center of the Israeli-settled Gush Etzion region.

* Professor Benny Morris’s 1987 book, The Birth of the Palestine Refugee Problem, lays responsibility for the suffering and fate of the Arabs of British Mandate Palestine following Israel’s War of Independence in 1948 on the political leadership and defense forces of the newly created Jewish state. In subsequent publications, based on evidence from documents that earlier were unavailable to him, Morris revises his critique and places greater responsibility upon the Arab leadership. Still considered among Israel’s “New Historians,” he is no longer associated with the revisionist academic left.
south of Jerusalem by the Nassar family who use their claim of property ownership and the history of their court case against the Government of Israel as a public relations and income generating source;

overnight home hospitality with Palestinian families in Bethlehem;
lunch at a Palestinian refugee camp;
crossing an IDF checkpoint alongside Palestinians;
a visit to Birzeit University, a center of Palestinian political radicalism;
a tour of the Arafat Museum and Mausoleum in Ramallah;
a video conference with Gaza residents;
a meeting with Mariam Barghouti, a Ramallah-based journalist and advocate of the BDS Movement, and others who represent a similar perspective.

Other than myself, there was no Israeli voice from the right of the political center, or even from the center left.

By the time the students arrived in Efrat there was no gainsaying their partisanship. Conflicting facts were dismissed, some even ridiculed. Anecdotes they were offered that described day-to-day coexistence between local Jews and Arabs were ignored because they didn’t fit the recognized paradigm. Consequently, additional information that would have broadened their understanding of the conflict was either rejected or remained undisclosed, since this acrimonious session ended earlier than it might have otherwise.

The Boston College visit seemed designed to overwhelm the students with powerful affective experiences and poignant imagery that lent credence only to the Palestinian narrative.

These experiences have engendered the development of a different kind of “alternative” tour program in Efrat, a “counter tourism” itinerary, as one person has quipped. It is based on a two- to four-day homestay in the community, Thursday through Sunday, for Christian college students. The participating Christian institutions, it should be noted, are not affiliated with any of the evangelical churches known for their Zionist sympathies. The semester-long overseas Middle East Studies programs they offer are based in surrounding Muslim countries, Jordan, Egypt, or Turkey. They allocate more time to the Islamic world, Christianity, and to the region’s Palestinians than to Israel. But their program directors are committed to offering their students a somewhat broader perspective of the conflict.*

These programs commit to an extended stay in Efrat, in contrast to the more typical 90 minutes, which affords the students a tour of the town and the surrounding Gush Etzion region. During their stay, they listen to lectures from some of the local residents, among them distinguished professors, senior military and security personnel, and noted rabbis. They learn about the state of Israel, Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish culture, this time from a Jewish and Zionist perspective. But, according to over 500 post-visit completed questionnaires received to date, the greatest impact on the students is made by the families who serve as their Shabbat weekend hosts. These are a number of English-speaking families who generously welcome these students into their homes.

Once the sun begins to set on Friday evening, these Christian students are immersed, for the first and most likely only time, in a full and traditional Shabbat. They attend synagogue services on Friday night and Saturday morning, returning each time to a sumptuous meal accompanied by traditional Shabbat melodies. The no-holds-barred Shabbat-table discussions delve, I’m told, mainly into Jewish religious practices and beliefs about which the Christian students are endlessly curious. But the talk usually gets around to politics and how these Efrat residents view the conflict. The discussions often last long into the night or at least until the lights in the house are automatically extinguished by the Shabbat clock. Throughout their stay, the students encounter a cross section of the residents. They listen to

* The directors of these programs wish to remain anonymous.
the many views and learn that some, to their surprise, strongly contradict one another.

The “alternative” weekend in Efrat challenges some of the opinions about Israel to which these students had previously been exposed. Following this weekend, one student wrote: “No one can be dehumanized—IDF, settlers, right-wing Zionists—they’re all people like me trying to do what’s right.” Another wrote: “Settlers are people too.”

What accounts for the dissimilarity in the responses of students whose itinerary brings them to Efrat for only a lecture, the Boston College group being only an extreme example, and those who remain for a Shabbat weekend? Both are familiar with Israel being publicly censured in mainstream and social media. Both have been exposed to readings in which Israel is accused of practicing apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Both arrive in Efrat influenced by previous meetings with Arab and Israeli speakers on the far political left.

Student groups making only a short call at what is, in their eyes, a “settlement” such as Efrat are virtually fated to leave with the same opinions they had when they arrived. Their visits are too circumscribed to facilitate the type of social interaction with residents that with sufficient time can engender trust and credibility. Without developing trust and credibility in the people they meet, the students remain resistant to allowing any contradictory information to alter their world view.

By contrast, students whose visit lasts a few days, irrespective of their experiences until then, develop a sense of Efrat as a community of people—people with names and faces, with family roles, with personal aspirations and personal problems, with favorite sports teams and musical groups, and with dental appointments just like them. These people have opinions, many opinions. And they express a desire for peace. Upon their departure, most of these students acknowledge a newly acquired appreciation for the complexity of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Without losing sympathy for the Palestinians, they are willing for the first time to take Israeli arguments under consideration, and they recognize some of themselves in these “settlers.”

Both types of visits point to the importance of emotions in shaping people’s political views, a fundamental principle for those engaged in Israel advocacy. The pathos engendered in visitors taken to witness the squalor of a Palestinian refugee camp or the overshadowing presence of “The Wall” is calculated to elicit strong sympathy for the condition of the Palestinians, especially when these experiences are presented from the Palestinian perspective of victimhood. It is easy to understand how, following these experiences, a frontal lecture by an anonymous settler who insists on the ancient historical and modern legal rights of the Jewish people to Judea and Samaria or, even less relevant, being shown a PowerPoint presentation that boasts of Israel’s high-tech achievements, might fall on deaf ears and even rankle a group of compassionate foreign visitors. Pro-Palestinian ideologues and the Palestinian Authority long ago learned that the mind follows the heart and not the other way around. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, take note.

Student groups making only a short call at what is, in their eyes, a ‘settlement’ such as Efrat are virtually fated to leave with the same opinions they had when they arrived.
How Israel Became a Television Powerhouse

The unlikely rise of a pop-culture leader

By Hannah Brown

You don’t often see perfectly chilled martinis served at conferences in Israel, but the TLV Formats Conference was an event that was out of the ordinary. It was held for the second time in September 2017, and hundreds of buyers from television networks around the world came to Tel Aviv to snatch up new Israeli shows—scrambling to get ahead of the huge international TV convention called MIPCOM the following month in Cannes. Over the past decade, Israel has become one of the world’s most prolific exporters of “formats”—industry jargon for concepts and programs. Sometimes an American TV network takes a show in Hebrew such as Hatufim (Prisoners of War) and turns it into Homeland, the Claire Danes Showtime drama about a bipolar CIA agent. Other times, Israeli shows have become hits without being remade. The past two years have seen the worldwide success of Fauda, a tense and thrill-packed series from Israel’s YES cable network about a counterterrorism unit and the terrorists they fight. The subtitled version of the show, which is half in Hebrew and half in Arabic, has become a huge hit for Netflix.

When the panels ended and the bar opened, the participants sipped their martinis and made deals until the wee hours. This dynamic was repeated in March 2018 at the Innovative TV Conference in Jerusalem hosted by Keshet Media Group, the largest Israeli television company. Guests included Casey Bloys, presi-

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dent of HBO programming; David Nevins, president and CEO of Showtime; Gary Newman, chairman and CEO of Fox Television; and Kevin Reilly, president of TBS and TNT. A month later, at the Series Mania competition in France, the YES series *On the Spectrum* won the top prize, a year after YES had won with *Your Honor*. This show about a judge drawn into the underworld after his son critically injures a mobster’s son in a hit-and-run is being remade in English by Robert and Michelle King, the creators of the beloved CBS legal drama *The Good Wife*.

Netflix is making an English-language version of YES’s *The Good Cop*, the story of a straitlaced police officer (Josh Groban) and his less scrupulous father (Tony Danza) and is already committed to producing and showing four seasons of *Greenhouse Academy*, based on a show for preteens called *Ha Hamama*. The Israeli show, *Yellow Peppers*, from Keshet International, about a boy with autism and his family who live in a small village in the Negev, was remade by the BBC as *The A Word*, which is set in the Lake District of England. These are just a few of the dozens of Israeli shows that are currently being remade all over the world.

But the highest-profile upcoming series is an HBO-Keshet coproduction about the kidnappings and murders of Jewish and Arab boys in 2014 that led up to that year’s war in Gaza. Its guiding hand is Hagai Levi. Levi was the creator of the series *BeTipul*, remade in 2008 by HBO as *In Treatment* and the first Israeli show to sell its format abroad. Levi is working with Joseph Cedar, perhaps Israel’s foremost writer-director; his most recent film, *Norman*, starred Richard Gere, and two other Levi movies, *Footnote* and *Beaufort*, were nominated for Oscars in the Best Foreign Language category.

How is it that Israel, a country that had no television at all until the mid-1960s and that continues to be under daily attack in elite precincts around the world, has become a leading force in the one of the most influential and important mediums? Is Israel’s prominent new role in television going to prove an enduring facet of worldwide popular culture, or is Israel merely the flavor of the month on the international TV circuit?

From 1966 until the early 1990s, there was just one Israeli channel, run by the government, that featured mostly news, documentaries, shows for children, and imported series. The transformation began when a commercial network, Channel Two, was officially launched in the early 1990s. It caught on, partly because it did things that suggested its programmers actually thought about the needs of the people who were watching. Channel Two showed the news at 8 p.m., when people were sitting around after dinner, instead of at 9 p.m., as the government channel did, when people wanted to go out or go to sleep. It hired celebrities such as pop stars to host game shows, but most of all, Channel Two spent money on programming.

Three companies—Keshet, Reshet, and Tel Ad—were responsible for the programming, and by the mid-1990s, they had discovered that local audiences were eager to watch shows about Israelis. A series called *Tiranoot* (Basic Training), about the army, ran three seasons and made stars out of its cast. Another popular show was a glitzy soap, *Ramat Aviv Gimmel*, named for the upscale neighborhood where it took place (think *Melrose Place* on the Mediterranean). It was followed by *Florentine*, another series that focused on attractive young people and their lives after
military service, but in a very different context—it was about their struggles to define their identities in the aftermath of the Rabin assassination in 1995, and it was set in a rundown neighborhood that was beginning to attract artists and bohemians. The cast went on to star in Israeli movies, commercials (which had previously been shown only before movies but were seen now on television), and films (Ayelet Zurer starred opposite Tom Hanks in *Angels & Demons*, the sequel to *The Da Vinci Code*).

Another commercial entity, Channel 10, was added to the mix in 2002. Now Israeli television resembles the American landscape in miniature, as broadcasters compete with two cable companies, HOT and YES, featuring dozens of channels with locally produced programming. In addition to Keshet and Reshet, the two largest production companies, there are dozens of others, including Dori Media, Armoza, and Ananey Communications.

But the emergence of Israel as an important maker of international television began in the mid-2000s with *BeTipul* and *Hatufim*. *BeTipul*, which began in 2005 on HOT cable, took an extraordinarily simple (and low-budget) concept—a psychologist (Assi Dayan) treating patients—and realized it beautifully. In each episode, the shrink would see a different patient—a seductive and troubled young woman (played by Ayelet Zurer from *Florentine*) with whom the therapist fell in love; a guilt-ridden air-force pilot; a troubled married couple who seemed to have everything but were miserable—and at the end of the week, there would be an hour in which he discussed his patients and his life with his own supervisor.

*BeTipul* was the brainchild of Hagai Levi, who sold the format to HBO for the series it called *In Treatment*. The credits of the original *BeTipul* read like a who’s who of contemporary Israeli film and television directors, and include Ari Folman, whose 2008 film, *Waltz with Bashir*, was nominated for an Oscar, and Eran Kolirin, whose 2007 feature, *The Band’s Visit*, was turned into a Broadway musical in 2017. In addition to being made in the U.S., *BeTipul* has been remade in more than 20 markets—probably the record for a drama—including Russia, Japan, Brazil, and the Netherlands.

“The show was so accessible that often they didn’t need to write an American version,” said Adam Berkowitz, co-head of the television department at the talent agency CAA, who has brokered many of the deals between Israeli programs and foreign networks. "Instead they just translated the Israeli script, which is ironic, because it means that Israelis talk about the same things in their therapists’ office as Americans. It just shows how much the cultures are intertwined."

*Hatufim* traveled a similar path. The original was created by Gideon Raff in 2009 for Keshet, and it tells the story of Israeli prisoners of war who return home after a decade and may have been turned into Syrian agents during their captivity. The Israeli version lasted just two seasons and didn’t have a character quite like Carrie Mathison, the bipolar CIA agent. But, just as with *BeTipul*, the core of the story was enough to entice American premium cable networks, as well as broadcasters around the world, to remake it. *Homeland* was on Showtime just two years after *Prisoners of War* debuted in Israel. Like *Fauda*, *Hatufim* has also...

*Hatufim* tells the story of Israeli prisoners of war who return home after a decade and who may have been turned into Syrian agents during their captivity.
been a hit in its original Hebrew-language version, with subtitles on Hulu and other streaming services around the world.

The list of formats sold and developed by Israel in the realm of unscripted programming (or reality television) is equally long. A new show called *The Gran Plan*, in which three grandmothers take charge of a young person’s life for a week (perhaps the ultimate Jewish high concept), has already been sold to 25 territories.

These shows highlight the diversity of Israeli society, but audiences from around the world can connect to their plots. Reshet’s *Nevsu*, for example, a satirical sitcom about the marriage of an Ethiopian man and an Ashkenazi woman, is being remade by the Fox network.

Religious Jews are also having a moment on the small screen. Young, unmarried Modern Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem were the subject of the wildly popular (and somewhat soapy) *Srugim*, the title of which is a reference to the kind of kippot they wear. Several shows have focused on the ultra-Orthodox community, including *Shtisel*, about a strong-willed father and his artist son (which is being remade in the U.S.). One series, *Kipat Barzel*, which literally means the Iron Dome but which has also been translated as *The Iron Yarmulke*, about ultra-Orthodox teens who defy their families by enlisting in the IDF, was cited by several industry watchers as one of the few shows that was too Israeli to travel well.

The television industry is moving at such a whirlwind pace that even those in the center of it have a hard time keeping track. “I’m working on four Israeli series that I hope we will shoot this year,” says Karni Ziv, head of drama and comedy for Keshet Media Group—but when she describes them, there are actually five.

One, called *Eyes*, is set in the world of Mizrahi music, a popular industry in Israel that has not gotten much respect until recently. *Stockholm* is about several septuagenarian friends who know that one of them, an economist, is about to be named as the winner of the Nobel Prize. When he dies a week before the announcement, they decide to keep his death a secret until after he is announced as the winner—after all, how hard can it be? Of course, it turns out to be quite complicated. *The Missing File* is a series based on two Israeli crime novels by Dror Mishani, who was on the writing staff of *The Wisdom of the Crowd*, a recent series produced by Keshet for CBS. There are two new sitcoms: *Age Appropriate*, about an older woman with a younger boyfriend; and a second comedy featuring an old-fashioned father living on a *moshav* whose daughters and son come back to live with him because they can no longer afford Tel Aviv. The list of remakes of Israeli shows abroad that Ziv is supervising is even longer and includes versions of Israeli shows in Russia, the Czech Republic, Germany, and several Asian countries.

Ziv says of the days when she started her career: “I don’t think any of us thought that content in Hebrew can interest someone out there in the world.” The key change, for Ziv, is that TV is now a global industry in a way it never was before. “If you do a good series here, you have a chance to sell it or to make an adaptation. You get a good idea for a series, but you understand that you can’t produce it in Israel or it’s not really a Keshet Broadcasting series, but it’s still a very good idea, so you can take that idea and sell it as an idea to another territory.” When producing a series for Israel, she says, “I always think first about the Israeli audience. And then I will think: Will it travel? . . . But the core is: ‘Bring me a good story.’”

The one time any show has drawn negative attention for being Israeli was when the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement called for Netflix to cancel plans to broadcast the second season of *Fauda* in the spring of 2018. *Fauda* (the title is the Arabic word for chaos) was created by Lior Raz, a veteran of an elite special-forces unit turned actor/writer, and Avi Issacharoff, a journalist who specializes in Arab affairs.

It was sold to Netflix in 2016 by CAA’s Berkowitz. Netflix does not release ratings data, but the series was quickly picked up for a second season and received
critical acclaim from around the world. Stephen King praised it as “all thriller, no filler,” and the New York Times voted it one of the best international shows of 2017. Palestinian fans who don’t speak Hebrew watch the series on Netflix with English subtitles, and it’s become a guilty pleasure on the West Bank and in Gaza.

In March 2018, a BDS group wrote a letter to Netflix, urging the network not to broadcast the second season of the series. According to the group’s website, failing to cancel the show could “open Netflix to non-violent grassroots pressure and possible legal accountability.” The plan backfired. Netflix was not going to let a group of easily offended activists dictate its programming. Fifty of Hollywood’s heaviest hitters sent Netflix chief content officer Ted Sarandos a letter that read, in part, “As an organization comprised of prominent members of the entertainment industry dedicated to promoting the arts as a means to peace and to defending artistic freedom, we at Creative Community For Peace (CCFP) want you to know that we stand behind you and Netflix in the face of this blatant attempt at artistic censorship.” The signatories included Rick Rosen, head of television at WME; Gary Ginsberg, executive vice president of corporate marketing and communications of Time Warner Inc.; and Jody Gerson, chairman and CEO of Universal Music Publishing Group.

Netflix didn’t comment, but season two of the drama was released as planned on its spring schedule in late May. According to Raz, the flap will just win the show more fans. “Lior said it best—no one is taking it too seriously,” said Danna Stern, the head of acquisitions and programming for YES, the network that created Fauda.

“It’s ridiculous that they’re going after Fauda, because it shows two sides of the conflict and employs Arabic actors,” says CAA’s Berkowitz. “A lot of people in the Arab community are watching it and look forward to watching it. One of the reasons I’m so proud of it is that it shows both sides of the conflict and it shows that there are tragedies on both sides and that they’re all human beings. It shows their struggles. It’s not black and white, it’s gray. And it makes people more aware of the situation in the Middle East. I don’t believe it’s terribly one-sided at all. Its purpose is to show the humanity of the conflict and that it’s a real conflict and there is not an easy answer.”

The BDS move has certainly not spooked anyone in the Israeli television industry; in fact, most of those I interviewed seemed surprised that I brought it up. Certainly, the buyers at the two recent television conferences were more than happy to purchase Israeli shows. The most logical conclusion is that Israeli television has reached a tipping point—as the country’s high-tech industry did a generation ago—at which its product is of such good quality and so easy to work with that it has become an integral part of the international industry. Virtually no one, no matter how political, removes Intel Pentium processors, some of which are manufactured in Israel, from their computers, or refuses to exchange emails with someone whose antivirus program contains software created in Tel Aviv. Academics can try to ban Israelis from international conferences, but it seems unlikely that audiences watching, say, The Baker and the Beauty (poor baker falls for a supermodel) in their native language will be political enough to know or care about its blue-and-white origins.

Fauda was created by Lior Raz (center), a veteran of an elite special-forces unit, and Avi Issacharoff, a journalist who specializes in Arab affairs.

Greenhouse Academy is a Netflix remake of the Israeli tween adventure drama Ha Hamama.
MORE SERIOUS QUESTION is whether Israel will ever be a center for international television production. In 2014, two English-language shows began filming in Israel. *Dig* (a USA Network/Keshet International coproduction) was a mystery about an FBI agent investigating a murder in an archeological site in the Old City. *Tyrant* (for FX/Keshet International) was a drama about a ruling family in a Middle Eastern country whose son, a doctor in America, comes home for a wedding and gets roped into intrigues. After each show had wrapped a few episodes, the war with Gaza broke out and both series moved production, *Dig* to Croatia and New Mexico, and *Tyrant* to Morocco and other locations. (*Dig* ran one season and *Tyrant* ran three.) Even *Homeland* chose not to film in Israel during its sixth season, when Saul (Mandy Patinkin) visits his sister, a West Bank settler, but shot instead in Morocco.

An interesting development took place in 2017, when Netflix remade the tween adventure drama *Ha Hamama* as *Greenhouse Academy*. This English-language show set in California was filmed entirely in Israel. A small group of American actors joined the Israeli cast, and an American writer, Paula Yoo, collaborated with Israeli creator Giora Chamizer to write the series. Israeli crews speak English and are good at filming on a shoestring budget and a tight schedule, and that made Israel attractive as a location for Netflix. It seems unlikely that viewers who don’t know about the true location would ever guess.

“I think there will be more series that will be filmed in Israel in the future, but I think it would be helpful if the Israeli government offered tax breaks that are as competitive as other countries,” said Berkowitz. That said, the idea that Israel might at any moment find itself at war is clearly going to affect the comfort level of production companies.

Whether or not Israel actually becomes a locale for television shows, the fact remains that millions of viewers around the world are watching programs developed by Israelis every day, and many more such shows are in the pipeline. Jews have always had an affinity for storytelling, which was put to good use by the movie moguls who created Hollywood. Now it’s Israeli Jews who have used their brainpower and energy to crack the popular-culture code. And while some academics and intellectuals would like to boycott everything Israeli, the architects of the Israeli television boom have already harnessed the power of the airwaves to entertain the world.
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TRAPPED into a chair, my field of vision dominated by a video screen there was no turning away from and no switching off, a uniformed operative shouting slogans into my skull through a loudspeaker, I felt myself beginning to break. Yes, yes, yes, I have come to love Big Brother. Yes, American Airlines CEO Doug Parker, I will sign up for your stupid Aviator Red MasterCard with 50,000 bonus miles, if only you will make the screaming stop. An economy-class seat on American Airlines is unpleasant at the best of times, but after the fourth screeching high-volume credit-card pitch, I began to feel like poor Alex from A Clockwork Orange.

The great symbol of 20th-century-style totalitarianism is the loudspeaker. Censorship on the Lenin/Kim/Castro model is not oriented toward achieving silence but achieving its opposite: constant noise, always on message, pushing its victims toward homogeneity, conformity, and compliance. The great corporate dystopias of the science-fiction imagination have not come to pass and never will (for economic reasons that eluded Philip K. Dick and his ilk). But the naive libertarians among us should consider the great corporatist public-private partnerships of our time—airports, and air travel more generally—as an indicator of exactly how North Korean a corporation with the word “American” right there in the name can be when presented with a captive audience, temporarily delegated police powers, and the promise of credit-card profits, which are far fatter than those earned from ordinary airline operations.

It may be Mayor Eric Garcetti on the endless propaganda loop at LAX or Mayor Kasim Reed in ATL (I have not transited through...
Atlanta since the ascendancy of the comically named Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, whose announcements I am very much looking forward to), but the politicians are junior partners at best in this particular dystopia. This world belongs to Auntie Annie, and you will kneel before her.

Tyrants have always used the instruments of liberal democracy against liberalism and democracy. Political parties were a critical tool of oppression in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and remain so in China and Venezuela, where the United Socialist Party has been proclaimed the “political vanguard of the revolutionary process” that is currently starving children to death by the thousand. Elections themselves have been put to antidemocratic ends everywhere from Cuba to Iraq. But democracy’s greatest gift to the enemies of democracy has been the mass media: radio, television, Pravda, Völkischer Beobachter, RT, NPR, Coughlin, Hannity, Bannon, a dozen thousand Petersburgian trolls on Twitter and Facebook.

Obvious tyrants such as Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán manage the media through such old-fashioned tools as murdering reporters and shutting down unfriendly outlets, but seduction is at least as effective as domination. Which brings us to the odd situation of Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. tax code and Professor Philip Hamburger’s excellent new book on it. It bears the electric title Liberal Suppression—which of course calls to mind Jonah Goldberg’s smashing Liberal Fascism—above the considerably less sensational subtitle “Section 501(c)(3) and the Taxation of Speech.”

Readers should go into Professor Hamburger’s book with the foreknowledge that what’s between the covers is in tone and substance more like the subtitle than the title: an erudite, calm, straightforward, and illuminating legal argument that the current application of the U.S. tax code amounts to unconstitutional discrimination against churches and religious organizations threatened with the revocation of their nonprofit status—granted and governed under the auspices of Section 501(c)(3) of the tax code—should they engage in speech that is not to the liking of our would-be masters in Washington.

Hamburger, a professor at Columbia Law School, makes his argument with great intelligence and admirable modesty, and he does so in a way that is not only digestible by those of us with no legal training but also a genuine pleasure to read, something that cannot often be said of the lawyers who so often write about our public affairs.

Condensation will do some inevitable violence to the breadth and complexity of his argument, but Hamburger’s case is roughly this: The historical record is clear that American progressives have long sought to put a leash on the religious traditionalism that is the main impediment and alternative to American-style progressivism. This is evident from the Ku Klux Klan–inspired limitations on religious education—the Blaine amendments dating back to the 1870s that remain in force in 38 states—and other nativist insults to the Catholic Church that have come to be applied to other ornery Christian critics of contemporary liberalism.

Under the leadership of Hiram Evans—who exalted equally in the title Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and his Congressional Country Club membership—the Klan and the wider nativist movement it represented spelled out a specifically liberal case against Catholic doctrine and ecclesiology, holding that American Protestant congregations were naturally tolerant and democratic whereas the Catholic Church was authoritarian and illiberal. Presaging both Herbert Marcuse’s “repressive tolerance” and German-style “militant democracy,” Evans argued that taking a liberal and tolerant view of Catholicism put liberalism and toleration themselves in mortal danger.

“Any church which violates the principle of tolerance should thereby lose its own right to tolerance,” Hamburger quotes Evans arguing, insisting that liberals who “believe in free thought and free speech” should not “tolerate the Catholic propaganda on these grounds,” because that propaganda is, in Evans’s telling, “founded on denial of free thought and speech to Catholics themselves, and aims at a denial of those rights to all men.” (The moral hysteria of the old Ku
Klux Klan is strangely at home in the 21st century.)

American liberalism eventually incorporated a *theological* position—that churches should forgo direct involvement in politics as such—into its purportedly secular program. The historical record suggests strongly that Section 501(c)(3) imposes liberal Protestant theological dogma on the nation at large in clear violation of the First Amendment, insisting that everyone from Catholics to Orthodox Jews comply with the liberal idea of how a religious congregation ought to conduct its affairs.

Later came Lyndon Baines Johnson. Hamburger writes:

Prior to 1954, federal tax law did not limit the campaign speech of tax-exempt organizations. . . . Johnson's role in this suppression is well known. As documented by (among others) James Davidson and Patrick O'Daniel, the enactment of section 501(c)(3)'s campaign restriction was engineered by Johnson in response to events in Texas. But Johnson's contribution needs to be understood as part of the broader liberal demands for the segregation for speech.

In 1954, Johnson's senatorial primary opponent was a Catholic named Dudley T. Dougherty. Johnson supporters sent around materials warning against the danger of the Roman Catholic–Mexican vote, and they were criticized for it. "Much of the criticism came from conservative anti-Communist groups, especially Facts Forum and the Committee for Constitutional Government, both of which enjoyed exempt status as educational organizations," Hamburger writes. "During the campaign, therefore, in June 1954, Johnson arranged for Representative John McCor-mack—the Democratic whip—to ask the commissioner of the IRS to reconsider the exempt status of the Committee for Constitutional Government." The commissioner reported that the committee had not violated section 501(c)(3)'s existing restrictions on using propaganda to influence legislation.

Johnson found out about this on July 1, 1954. And so, Hamburger reports, "on July 2, Johnson proposed an amendment that Section 501(c)(3) organizations 'not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distribution of statements) any political campaign on behalf of any candidate for public office.'" Say this much for Lyndon Baines Johnson: He was not a procrastinator.

From the KKK to LBJ to Senator Bernie Sanders, who desired to gut the First Amendment in order to regulate political speech as a matter of "campaign finance," the question is always the same: Who is permitted to speak? When the *New York Times* savages Donald Trump in the run-up to an election, that is, in the progressive view, constitutionally protected free speech. When Citizens United, a nonprofit, does the same thing to Hillary Rodham Clinton, the same progressives argue that this represents the baleful influence of "big money" in politics, a species of bribery, in effect. (That is what the 2010 Supreme Court *Citizens United* case was about: whether a group of citizens has the right to show a film critical of a presidential candidate without the government's permission.) Citizens United was a nonprofit, while the *New York Times* is part of a substantial for-profit corporation with economic interests of its own—and a heck of a lot more "big money" at its disposal than some piddly right-wing nonprofit.

It is worth remembering that Democratic leader Harry Reid and every *Democrat in the Senate* voted to gut the First Amendment's protections for political speech when the Supreme Court ruled against empowering the federal government to censor a film critical of Hillary Rodham Clinton. Vladimir Lenin was correct in his assessment that the only real question in politics is: "Who, whom?" Hamburger argues convincingly that 501(c)(3) is in effect an unconstitutional licensing regime for political speech.

Liberalism enjoys various explicit subsidies for its media outlets, most notably public radio and public television. The giant media corporations enjoy the protection of the First Amendment, while Senators Sanders, Warren, Schumer, etc. would strip those protections from citizens' associations and grassroots groups that tend, at the moment, to lean conservative. Mayor Eric Garcetti can advertise himself to a captive audience at public expense with his endless
loop of self-promotion broadcast between TSA groinführer directives at LAX, but the local Catholic Church cannot, without facing financial punishment from the federal government, explain to its own parishioners how its teachings on abortion or poverty should be applied to public-policy questions. On truly controversial moral matters, the United States does have an established religion: quietism.

Of course, we must expect that the IRS and its political masters will bring to these questions the same fine nonpartisan approach that its now-retired official Lois Lerner took to tea-party groups, or that Houston’s former Democratic mayor Annise Parker had in mind when she subpoenaed the sermons of local pastors she suspects of being less than all-in with her transgender-rights agenda. The tinpot tyrants always have a loudspeaker or 70 at their disposal. They are in your newspaper, in your car, in your airport—in your head, and their critics must be silenced or suppressed because . . . that part is never made quite clear, except for the laughable insistence that two toilet-paper-and-petrochemical tycoons from Wichita covertly lean on the world’s political levers like a couple of prairie Illuminati while poor old Chuck Schumer sits there, powerless, abject, and put-upon.

Philip Hamburger considers every imaginable legal angle of the particular case of Section 501(c)(3) and its application to churches and other “idealistic organizations.” Every word of it is worth reading. But what is in the background is worth keeping in mind, too: Questions of culture and questions of state that, if current trends are left unchecked, threaten to reduce the scope and richness of democratic discourse in deeply illiberal ways. The First Amendment is not enough, and it never has been.

The Tyranny of Metrics
By Jerry Z. Muller
Princeton University Press, 220 pages

Reviewed by Tod Lindberg

The TYRANNY of Metrics
By Jerry Z. Muller’s latest book, The Tyranny of Metrics, seems designed to gladden the hearts of lovers of Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible: It promises a cri de coeur on behalf of humanism against a bloodless techscape of data analytics. Who calls out tyranny these days (apart, that is, from everyone who believes Donald Trump guilty of it)? Only those who dare to oppose it. Thus the stage is set for an epic confrontation between word and number.

Alas, a better title for the book would be Why Metrics Don’t Measure Up. It’s not metrics as such that vex Muller but the misuse of metrics, as well as the unintended consequences that flow when managers rely on them too crudely in assessing and rewarding performance. Far from overthrowing the tyrant, Muller ends up trying to counsel him on how to do his job better.

The Tyranny of Metrics is a short book, and it is typically a virtue when authors take the time to be concise, a practice that comes naturally to few. To work from an authoritative body of knowledge, to discern a theme worthy of exploration, and to eliminate all that is extraneous from its judicious development—these are the achievements of a master. They constitute the greatest gift an author can bestow on a reader.

Unfortunately, there is another kind of short book, and that is a book that should have been a magazine article. Here, the problem is filling out enough pages to achieve plausibility between cloth covers. This is the problem The Tyranny of Metrics faces and doesn’t quite manage to overcome.

The text of The Tyranny of Metrics is perhaps 40,000 words long. But in truth, about an eighth of that would have been sufficient for Muller’s argument. In a nutshell—indeed, the first chapter is called “The Argument in a Nutshell”—Muller holds that society has fallen prey to “metric fixation,” whose “key components” are the beliefs that numerical indicators of performance can replace experienced judgment; that transparency, or publicizing such indicators, brings accountability for performance; and that “the best way to motivate people…is by attaching rewards and punishments to their measured performance.”

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These include measuring what’s easiest to measure rather than assessing whether it’s the best gauge of desired outcomes; measuring “inputs” (say, how much you spend on education) rather than outputs (how much students learn); and excessive standardization (measuring college graduation rates in calculating “human capital” without acknowledging “the fact that all B.A.s are not the same”).

Worse, when metrics lead to rewards for good performance and punishment for poor performance, human beings will “game the metric.” They will engage in “creaming” by selecting an easier path to a higher score (surgeons who avoid operating on patients with complications, for example). They will seek lower standards for success (administrators who boost high-school graduation rates by lowering requirements). They will omit or distort data (police departments that reduce the rate of serious crime by booking potential felony offenses as misdemeanors). And they will outright cheat (teachers who alter student scores upward on standardized tests to show improved year-end performance).

Muller, a professor at Catholic University and the author of Capitalism and the Jews and many other works of economic history, offers a series of examples of these problems and how they play out in areas from medicine to the military. He calls them “case studies,” but that really isn’t what they are; a case study would entail detailed examination of both the pluses and minuses of measuring and counting. Muller offers a nod to the positive aspects, but it’s drawing up the indictments that interests him.

Muller has done no original research on these examples but rather is reporting on the work others have done. What is perhaps most striking, then, is how familiar the problems associated with metrics are. Muller tells the story of New York City’s undertaking an experiment in performance-based teacher pay, only to have a program evaluation conclude that there was “no evidence that teacher incentives increase student performance, attendance,” etc. But what we really have here (and there are examples throughout The Tyranny of Metrics) is a metric rebuttal to “metric fixation.” The New York City case actually seems to be an example of numbers doing what they are supposed to do.

As for the possibility of a broader critique, Muller does offer some quotations from big-picture-type thinkers thundering against—well, it’s not entirely clear what they’re against except straw men. Here’s Isaiah Berlin: “To demand or preach mechanical precision, even in principle, in a field incapable of it is to be blind and to mislead others.” Fine. But does this mean our practitioners of politics should not authorize experts to evaluate through clinical trials the safety and efficacy of new medications before they go on the market? No, that’s not what Berlin means, or Muller by quoting him.

I am firmly a member of the camp of Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible. But I am also a member of the editorial committee of the Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group, where a debate is raging over whether a “k-means cluster analysis” of issue importance among respondents offers a better way to understand voter behavior than demographic analysis. It’s not poetry, but it’s a debate worth having.

Dear Evan Palestinian

Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor
By Yossi Klein Halevi
Harper, 224 pages

Reviewed by Elliot Kaufman

The following passage appears at the outset of Yossi Klein Halevi’s new book: “The muezzin’s call to prayer filled the building. The voice was so strong, it seemed to be coming from the walls. I noticed some Jews turning visibly anxious. But one young man in a black hat and side locks, a visitor from New York, said to me, ‘You know, when you think about what they’re saying—“Allahu akbar,” God is great—it’s a good thing, no?’ Yes: so obvious, and yet in Hebron, Muslims and Jews can never take each other’s goodwill for granted. I wanted to hug him.”

I fear these words made me want to roll my eyes, as did the book’s title: Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor. After so many years of Jewish frustration, so much process but so little peace, what else is there to say to the Palestinians? And when will Yossi Klein Halevi

Elliot Kaufman, a recent graduate of Stanford University, is a Robert L. Bartley Fellow at the Wall Street Journal’s editorial page.
It is not entirely clear why Halevi thinks Palestinians will read his book, or even why listening to one another’s stories will help break the deadlock and achieve some real understanding.

This was unfair. As his powerful and eloquent book proves, Halevi suffers no illusions about the Palestinian national movement. He knows that the Palestinians have rejected every peace offer and partition plan, denied Jewish peoplehood and history, and, to the extent that they countenance it at all, see the two-state solution as a prelude to a maximalist victory—one Palestine from the river to the sea. “In supporting the Oslo process,” he reflects, “I had violated one of the commanding voices of Jewish history, the warning against naïveté.” Halevi includes all of this and more in the ten letters that form his book.

It is precisely because he has no more time for leaders such as Mahmoud Abbas that Halevi turns to a hypothetical Palestinian neighbor. The risk, both rhetorically and in actuality, is that because he has given up on official Palestinians, he is merely creating a fictional Palestinian with whom he can negotiate from his study in French Hill. But he’s up to something more interesting.

Capturing the enduring Jewish love of the land of Israel and the magic as well as the dilemmas of Zionism, the letters are highly compelling. There is no one better suited to tell the story of Israel and the Jewish people than Halevi—and not just to Palestinians. An inspired reading of the Israeli soul, Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor should be recommended to non-Jews and Jews alike.

Halevi offers Jews a model of productive engagement, teaching by example how to speak about Israel not just with sensitivity but also with honesty and integrity. And yet Halevi would be the first to admit that if only Jews buy his book, it will have been a failure. In order to reach everyday Palestinians, Halevi has released the Arabic translation of his book for free online. But of course he cannot compel his Palestinian neighbor to read it. Crucially, Palestinians still must choose to read Halevi’s letters and be exposed to the Israeli perspective. It is not altogether clear why Halevi thinks Palestinians will make that choice now, or even why listening to one another’s stories will help break the deadlock and achieve some real understanding. At times, the best reason he can offer is “the possibility of miracle—especially in this land,” noting that “as a religious person,” he is “forbidden to make peace with despair.” Elsewhere, he speculates that, because Israel has changed often since the 1980s, “if the past is any indication, we are due for another drastic shift in the Israeli story.”

Many readers will want reasons more solid than the winds of history or the possibility of miracles. For them, Halevi suggests that intimacy between Palestinians and Israelis could create a “basis for political flexibility, for letting go of absolutist claims,” and for fighting through the pain of trauma. “We must know each other’s dreams and fears” so both parties can work around some of their own.

Here, Halevi is at his best. He recognizes that until the Palestinians understand the Jewish attachment to the entire biblical land of Israel, any partition will remain unthinkable. Exchanging stories matters because Palestinians must realize that “partition is an act of injustice” not just to their side, but to the Israelis, too. After all, political moderation makes sense only in the face of worthy yet compelling claims to justice.

Storytelling is not the only path to intimacy. In a previous book, At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden, Halevi wrote of Jewish–Muslim brotherhood through the mystical search for God. Indeed, he has predicted in these pages that “the next step in the evolution of the interfaith encounter will be shifting from dialogue to shared spiritual experience. Interfaith will become a great spiritual adventure, providing access to one another’s inner worlds.”

While Halevi may verge on the sentimental in matters of religion, when it comes to politics, he hopes for only enough intimacy to convince the Palestinians that they must respect a border. “No two people who have fought a hundred-year existential war,” he writes, “can share the intimate workings of government.” Furthermore, he recognizes that even a Palestinian cold peace would probably require a miracle, and to my relief, he makes clear that he will not give away the house until that miracle occurs.

If, one day, a Palestinian of Halevi’s stature publishes Letters to My Jewish Neighbor, and his book is imbued with the same understanding, charity, and dignity, we will know that the miracle is under way. Hugging will be superfluous.
The Middle East’s Other Refugees

Uprooted: How 3,000 Years of Jewish Civilization in the Arab World Vanished Overnight
By Lyn Julius
Valentine Mitchell, 340 pages
Reviewed by Ben Cohen

HISTORY has been deeply unkind to the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, and so too has the historical record. As the British author Lyn Julius points out in Uprooted, the persecution and ethnic cleansing of more than 800,000 Jewish denizens of Arab lands from the 1940s onward is a story still confined to the margins of more visible tragedies.

Foremost among these is the Holocaust, commonly regarded as a purely European episode, yet one whose German architects intended ultimately to include the Jews of Arab lands. That ambition was checked when the Allies stopped the Nazi advance in North Africa at the close of 1942. Then there is the outflow of approximately 750,000 Palestinian Arab refugees during Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, still presented in many Western and Arab circles as the origin of the region’s present problems.

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The Arab-refugee issue has become grossly expanded in another way as well: The Palestinians, uniquely among the world’s refugee populations, are compelled by the United Nations to transfer refugee status from parents to children. Thus there are currently 5 million Palestinian “refugees.”

Because of these events, the Jewish exodus from the Arab world is commonly perceived as simply one more misfortune among the myriad population transfers and ethno-national conflicts that followed World War II. Yet according to the historian Nathan Weinstock, it remains an exodus with no precedent in Jewish history, “even when compared with the flight of the Jews from Tsarist Russia, Germany in the 1930s, or massive emigration from Eastern Europe after the war.”

Julius, herself the product of a Jewish family driven from Iraq, cogently explains how the Jews of the Arab world effectively became denationalized. She argues persuasively that the rapid unraveling of these Jewish communities, whose presence in these areas predated the emergence of Islam, should be understood above all else as an offense against the elementary codes of human rights.

The inherent danger with these kinds of accounts is that the victims end up as a beatified collective, at which point historical writing quickly becomes apologia. Julius avoids this basic trap. She makes it clear that there is no archetypal “oriental Jew,” and no literary sleight of hand can encompass the vastly different experiences of Jews from cowed, closed Yemen and from open, ebullient Morocco. Nor can Cairene Jews, educated in European private schools, be lumped in with those crammed into the Jewish quarters of Fez or Meknes. Insofar as these communities began exhibiting more and more similarities as the 20th century progressed, it was the result of the draconian, discriminatory legal regimes imposed on them by the Arab governments under which they lived.

By the late 1950s, the vast bulk of these communities, from the western reaches of North Africa to the eastern borders of Saudi Arabia, had been brutally wrenched from their roots. Typical measures along the way included stripping Jews of their citizenship, freezing their property and assets, systematically intimidating them through mass arrests and detentions, proscribing Zionism as a crime, and subjecting them to humiliations both large and petty in the workplace and in schools.

Drawing on the scholarship of historians such as Matthias Kuentzel and Jeffrey Herf, Julius spotlights the ideological overlaps between German National Socialism, the various strains of Arab nationalism, and the overtly anti-Semitic Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood. “The root cause of the post-1948 exodus of over 850,000 Jews from the Middle East and North Africa,” Julius writes, “was pan-Arab racism, itself influenced by Nazism.” That truth has become more and more evident as the years have passed, especially in Israel, where historians and politicians...
are beginning to grasp the significant ties between the Holocaust and the uprooting of the Jews from the Arab world. The clearest example of this trend, which Julius cites approvingly, was the decision by Israel’s Finance Ministry in November 2015 to extend Holocaust-survivor benefits to Israelis who survived Nazi-era persecution in Morocco, Algeria, and Iraq. In the words of Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, this was “the righting of a historical wrong.”

If Kahlon’s characterization appeals to Julius, it is perhaps because she sees her task as correcting a series of historical wrongs that, 70 years after the fact, still confound our appreciation of the Jewish exodus from the Arab world. The critical difference between the Middle East’s uprooted Jews and the Palestinian Arabs is that, excepting a handful of cases from Egypt and Libya, these Jews were never assigned refugee status. This discrepancy, Julius asserts, has “narrowed the [Middle East] conflict to the Israel-Palestinian dispute and excluded the larger Arab context in which the expulsion of the Jewish refugees from the Arab countries is central.”

Israel’s approach to the claims of these Jewish refugees has evolved. The idea of kizzuz—according to which Jewish losses were thought of as being offset by Palestinian losses—has given way to recognition of the judicial importance of individual compensation. Julius credits former President Bill Clinton for inaugurating this idea in 2000, when he opined that one element of an eventual Palestinian-Israeli agreement would be the creation of a compensation fund for refugees that included “the Israelis who were made refugees by the war, which occurred after the birth of the State of Israel.” Clinton explained: “Israel is full of people, Jewish people, who lived in predominantly Arab countries who came to Israel because they were made refugees in their own lands.”

Julius accepts that the parallel between the Palestinians and the Jews of the Arab world is not a neat one. She believes, in fact, that attempting to draw such a parallel does a disservice to the Jews, who were the targets of government-sanctioned discrimination mainly during peacetime. The Palestinian refugees, by contrast, were displaced as a result of the fierce fighting between the Haganah and the invading Arab League armies. The very act of raising this issue, Julius contends, challenges the “unchallenged sway” that the Palestinian-refugee issue has held thus far. At the moment, “Jewish refugee rights are dismissed as an impediment to peace, denigrated, or ignored, while Arab rights—including the much-vaunted Right of Return—are put on a pedestal.”

As a corrective, Julius puts forward the idea of the Arab world’s Jews as having endured three successive “colonizations.” In the seventeenth century, there was Islam; in the 19th century, there were European powers; and, finally, in the last century and this one, there has been a “colonization of facts” by which “the story of the Jews from the Middle East and North Africa has been erased and falsified.” Uprooted will surely not be the last historical examination of the Arab world’s exiled Jews, but it is among the first to launch a frontal assault on the myths and preconceptions associated with their plight. For that alone, its value will endure.

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Three Wise Men

Racing Against History: The 1940 Campaign for a Jewish Army to Fight Hitler
By Rick Richman
Encounter, 272 pages

Reviewed by Jonathan Silver

In mid-June, the American Jewish Committee published a study documenting just how differently American Jews and Israelis think about the Jewish condition. On Israeli security, the American president, religious pluralism, and other issues of real consequence, the gap between Israeli and American Jews is very wide.

The historical sources of this divide are illuminated in Rick Richman’s eye-opening Racing Against History: The 1940 Campaign for a Jewish Army to Fight Hitler. In 1940, Chaim Weizmann, Ze’ev Jabotinsky, and David Ben-Gurion all made independent trips to the United States to raise a Jewish army to fight Hitler. Each mission failed. And the reasons for their failure show us that disagreements
between American Jews and Israel are not new, and they are not the result of Prime Minister Netanyahu or any American president.

Britain had been the arena of Zionist diplomacy in the first years of the 20th century. But Zionist fortunes declined from the 1917 Balfour Declaration to the 1937 Peel Commission to the 1939 White Paper. British foreign policy had abandoned the Jews, embraced the Arabs, and, in the moments before war really broke out, was complicit in tightening the noose around the neck of Jewish Europe.

Chaim Weizmann, the scientist turned Zionist leader, tried to reorient British policy at every turn. He was an insider, a courtier who plied his charm in the private audience of the gentleman’s club. And on Weizmann’s 1940 trip to the United States, he operated in the same style. Richman describes private meetings with Louis Brandeis, even President Roosevelt. But it was all for naught.

In Britain, Neville Chamberlain had rebuffed Weizmann’s offer of military support, and he wasn’t about to try to raise a Jewish fighting force in isolationist America. So he decided to refocus his trip on fundraising and to ask the American government to pressure Britain into relaxing its immigration restrictions in Palestine.

Richman, a lawyer in Los Angeles who contributes to Commentary’s blog, demonstrates that Weizmann’s reflections on 1940 are consistent with assessments of the American Diaspora he had been making for decades. As early as 1916, Weizmann had written that assimilation was “the natural progress of emancipated Jews” outside of the land of Israel. In America, he found that assimilationism pressure had led Jews to adopt the same isolationist view as their non-Jewish neighbors. American Jews believed that they were already in the promised land, and they would not let European strangers or Middle Eastern dreamers endanger their standing. As Richman tells it, Weizmann “maintained a studious public silence on anything that might be construed as suggesting that America, or American Jews, should actively respond to what was transpiring in Europe, other than by assisting in building Palestine through investments and contributions.”

Then came Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the so-called Revisionists. He was in the United States from March until his untimely death in August. The day he arrived, Jabotinsky walked off the Samaria, up to the New York Times, and matter-of-factly said that “if there is going to be real military war, there is going to be a Jewish army, fighting under a Jewish flag on the side of the democracies.” He saw Europe as it was, a “Zone of Jewish Distress,” and did not want Jews to believe that an Allied victory by itself could ensure Jewish survival there. Jabotinsky had previously argued, prophetically, for an evacuation scheme from Europe. Even in the event of Allied victory, he would have thought it absurd for Jews to return to Poland and Germany. He demanded recognition of a state in Palestine and thought it essential for his people to join the war effort in order for the Allies to incur Jewish debt—Jewish debt that would be repaid at the settlement table after the war by recognizing a Jewish state.

Jabotinsky also thought it essential for Jews to assume political responsibility for themselves—not only to bear Jewish arms, but to govern Jewish citizens in a Jewish state—in order to leave behind the ghetto mentality they had developed in the Diaspora. His vision of Jewish excellence, hadar, called impoverished and weak Diaspora Jews to the grandeur and magnificence that can be endowed only by sovereignty.

After the fall of France in June, Jabotinsky delivered what would be the last major speech of his life. In “The Second World War and a Jewish Army,” he explained to a standing-room-only audience of over 4,000 that “the principle by which all great nations live and without which they die” is “No Surrender.” The West must not surrender to Hitler, and the Jews must not surrender this chance to reassert the dignity of self-government. A Jewish army would “signify that the Jewish people choose a cloudy day to renew its demand for recognition as a belligerent on the side of a good cause.” Constituted “as a Jewish army,” Jews should “demand the right of fighting the giant rattlesnake.” Offers to serve began to be received and one can see how
Jabotinsky’s call to hadar might have struck a chord. But it was not to be. Jabotinsky died suddenly that August. He was mourned by tens of thousands in the streets of New York and by many more thousands around the world. But in the immediate aftermath of his most promising speeches, it was the American Jewish establishment that criticized him as a militant extremist whose work did not embody Jewish values.

Then David Ben-Gurion arrived in October 1940, on Rosh Hashanah, and managed to offend just about every potential Jewish ally to be found, including the Zionists. Like Weizmann, Ben-Gurion thought it impolitic to ask Jewish Americans to support a Jewish military force in the midst of a presidential election. So for the first month, he undertook no major speeches. And when, after the election that gave Franklin Roosevelt a third term, he did speak, Ben-Gurion lacked Jabotinsky’s rhetorical power. In Richman’s telling, his visit to America at the end of 1940 was a disappointment.

Richman’s book reveals how three singular Zionist leaders came to America, each with their distinct habits of mind and ways of negotiating the country, its politics, and its people. Despite their apparent disagreements, they all stood for Jewish particularity and Jewish strength as the keys to the Jewish future. But in America, the Jewish future would not be decided by Jewish strength or understood in the name of Jewish particularity. The differences between Jewish Americans and Zionists predate Israel’s founding. They predate the Second World War. Richman’s remarkable account of a telling moment in history shows how the differences between American Jews and the descendants of Weizmann, Jabotinsky, and Ben-Gurion grow straight from roots of Zionism itself. 

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Save One.
Read Everywhere.
A writer-director’s profound meditations on violence

By Terry Teachout

Martin McDonagh burst upon the American theater scene at the age of 28 when The Beauty Queen of Leenane, his first play, opened on Broadway in 1996 and ran there for 365 performances. Two decades later, he is widely acknowledged as one of the foremost playwrights of his generation. Hangmen, his latest play, was a hit in London and off Broadway last year and is expected to transfer to Broadway later this season. McDonagh has simultaneously pursued a parallel career in film, writing and directing In Bruges (2008), Seven Psychopaths (2012), and, most recently, Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (2017). All three have won critical acclaim, and Three Billboards, which received seven Oscar nominations, was modestly successful at the box office.

Youthful success is almost always followed sooner or later by a sharp negative reaction. In McDonagh’s case, it was finally triggered by the release of Three Billboards, whose characters include a psychopathically violent racist who appears at film’s end to have changed his brutal ways. Many progressive-minded critics, among them April Wolfe of the Village Voice, were offended by the suggestion that such a creature might be capable of a transformation as profound as the one he seems to undergo: “In some ways, watching this film is like reading those alt-right fashion profiles of Richard Spencer that insisted we overlook his campaign of quiet terror and find common ground with him.”

That an ostensibly serious critic could interpret Three Billboards...
in so rigidly reductive a way is, however, less a commentary on McDonagh's film than a sign of the times. The underlying moral complexity of Three Billboards is alien to many younger moviegoers, who increasingly think it wrong for an artist not to make crystal-clear at all times which of his characters wear the black hat and which the white, and who judge art by the degree to which it accords with their own definitions of “black” and “white.” Not so McDonagh, who uses the graphic violence that is his trademark not to titillate the jaded but to shock his viewers into looking more closely at the world in which they live—a world about whose nature his own vision is singularly acute.

BORN IN LONDON in 1970, McDonagh is the younger son of working-class Irish Catholic parents who moved to England to better themselves. Though he grew up in the midst of a self-consciously Irish culture and has set most of his plays in Ireland, he has never lived there. Similarly, he went to Catholic schools but lost his faith early on and dropped out at 16, thereafter educating himself by reading widely and watching plays on the BBC.

McDonagh was initially more interested in film than in theater, which he saw as “a middle-class art form...that I as a working-class person was cut out of.” But it was the stage for which he started writing, and he was already fully formed as an artist by the time The Beauty Queen of Leenane was premiered. Since then he has written eight plays, four of which are set in England, The Pillowman (2003) in an unspecified totalitarian state, and A Behanding in Spokane (2010) in the U.S.—they are defined less by their settings than by their characters, who are indistinguishable from the demented blabbermouths who inhabit his Irish plays.

Whatever their nominal origins, most of McDonagh's characters speak an ornate patois that is a savage parody of the clichés of stage Irishness (“Oi have me drunkard mammy to look after”). In addition, they are injustice collectors whose passion to settle old scores has been intensified to the point of rage by the closed-minded insularity of the communities in which they live. Typical of McDonagh’s flamboyant treatment of this latter theme is The Lieutenant of Inishmore (2001), a black comedy that portrays a cell of murderous Irish terrorists as a gaggle of drunken halfwits who love their pets more than their fellow men. By play's end, the stage is slippery with blood and body parts—not to mention the battered corpses of two cats.

Terrorism is no laughing matter, yet nothing about The Lieutenant of Inishmore is more characteristic of McDonagh than the fact that it is a comedy. The play, which he says was inspired by “pacifist rage,” is a scalding-hot broth of contempt for the “stupid violence” of the IRA. His Ireland is no verdant Eden but a desperate land full of self-destructive sentimentalists who feed on embroidered memories and long-cherished grudges—and who slaughter innocent bystanders in the name of “the patriot game.” How best to tell the truth about such madness? McDonagh chooses to make fun of it: “Didn't he outright cripple the poor fella laughed at that girly scarf he used to wear, and that was when he was 12?” “His first cousin, too, that fella was, never minding 12! And then pinched his wheelchair!”

Like all of McDonagh's plays, The Lieutenant of Inishmore is concerned with the corrupting power of vengefulness. That a playwright of Irish descent should be preoccupied with such a subject makes perfect sense, since the history of Ireland in the 20th century was a tale of religious and cultural irredentism run amok. But McDonagh casts his net wider, encompassing as well what one might call “spiritual irredentism.” In A Behanding in Spokane, the vengeful party is a homicidal maniac who has spent the past 47 years searching for his left hand, from which he was involuntarily separated by “six hillbilly bastards” who lived to regret their crime; in Hangmen, it is a mysterious stranger who torments a public executioner whom he believes to have hanged an innocent man. In Beauty Queen and The Lonesome West (1997), by contrast, the conflicts are between blood relatives who have come to despise one another. Yet whoever they are and wherever they live, they have in common the desire for vengeance and the willingness to obtain it by...
any means necessary, violence very much included.

Extreme though it is, McDonagh’s violence is never gratuitous, much less quasi-pornographic. It is used to dramatize a moral precept, which is that the consequences of violent acts, in particular those to which men resort when seeking revenge, can neither be foreseen nor controlled. In McDonagh’s world, violence is a train of powder that, once ignited, is prone to blow up the just and the unjust—not to mention the person who set it off.

This theme also dominates McDonagh’s feature films, though the first two, In Bruges and Seven Psychopaths, are more conventional in approach than his stage plays. It had always been his ultimate goal to both write and direct his own films, not merely because he wanted to reach a wider, less class-bound audience but because, like Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder before him, he was determined to secure the artistic integrity of his work (“Part of the director’s job on a film is to protect the writer, so that’s half the battle”). But to achieve these goals, he was forced at first to make movies that fit more or less recognizably into the comic crime-film genre.

To be sure, In Bruges, the story of a pair of guilt-ridden Irish hitmen who hole up in Belgium after bungling a job, has serious overtones. It is set, for instance, in Bruges, a city full of cathedrals visited mainly by tourists, so as to hint at the effects of Europe’s loss of religious faith. Still, neither In Bruges nor Seven Psychopaths aspire in the end to being much more than formidably intelligent entertainment, bearing the same relationship to McDonagh’s stage plays that Graham Greene’s thrillers of the ’30s do to his more ambitious novels of spiritual malaise and distress.

Not so Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri, the first of McDonagh’s films to be directly comparable in both stylistic approach and moral gravity to his best plays. It is not, to begin with, a comedy, black or otherwise. Funny though it sometimes is, Three Billboards is set in motion by an event of the utmost foulness—the rape and murder of a teenage girl—and at no point does McDonagh play that hideous occurrence for laughs. To the contrary, Three Billboards is centered on Mildred, the dead girl’s mother (played with gaunt and horrific force by Frances McDormand), who refuses to accept that her killer cannot be found and punished.

To goad the local police into solving the crime, Mildred rents three billboards located on the outskirts of the small town in rural Missouri where she lives, using them to post a message accusing Ebbing’s police chief (Woody Harrelson) of having failed to do his duty. By doing so, she enrages Officer Dixon (Sam Rockwell), an ill-educated, black-hating uniformed thug, who thereupon commits a series of violent acts that lead to his firing. A spiral of reciprocal bloodshed ensues that threatens to tear Ebbing apart, at the height of which Mildred joins forces with Dixon in order to hunt down, vigilante-style, her daughter’s killer.

But Three Billboards does not end there. Instead, Mildred and Dixon seem to have a change of heart just before the final blackout:

MILDRED: You sure about this?

DIXON: About killing this guy? Not really. You?

MILDRED: Not really. I guess we can decide along the way.

What has happened to them? McDonagh plants a clue when, early in the film, we see another character reading Flannery O’Connor’s A Good Man Is Hard to Find. This is not merely a touch of local color but a signal to the viewer that Three Billboards will be a secular counterpart of O’Connor’s stories about the operation of divine grace, a narrative conditioned by McDonagh’s own early exposure to the Roman Catholic dogma that he would later reject but never forget. In Christian theology (and the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary), grace is “the free and unmerited favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners.” The recipients of such grace may choose to reject it—a decision that in O’Connor’s stories can lead to dire consequences ranging from self-mutilation to first-degree murder—but they are changed by it nonetheless.

Anyone familiar with A Good
Man Is Hard to Find will realize at once that Three Billboards is cut from the same cloth. Nowhere in the film does McDonagh suggest that the path of the regenerate is anything but stony. As O’Connor wrote, “all human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.” In the case of Mildred no less than Dixon, this pain arises from the knowledge that both characters must abandon all hope of avenging Mildred’s daughter in order to break the endless cycle of vengeance and reprisal and start anew. Nor can we be sure that either of them will succeed in doing so. All we know is that hate has crippled their souls, and that they are now willing at last to consider—however tentatively—another way to live.

IT IS EASY to see why so many people dislike Three Billboards. To begin with, it is no more realistic a portrayal of everyday life in rural Missouri than The Lieutenant of Inishmore is of the activities of the IRA. It is, rather, a parable, one in which reality is simplified and exaggerated, almost in the manner of a stage play, so as to more clearly depict the spiritual redemption that is its subject.* For this reason, those who are unreceptive to the anti-naturalistic illusional techniques of theater are no more likely to appreciate Three Billboards.

“Woke” critics who view art through the prism of politics, by contrast, dislike the film as a “teachable moment” from which we are expected to learn that the human heart can only be cleansed of racism by way of political reeducation—a notion that could not have been further from McDonagh’s mind. The intensity with which some of these critics have attacked Three Billboards suggests that they are irredentists of yet another sort, power-seeking idealists who believe that their opponents are, like Dixon, too evil to be capable of redemption and therefore must not be debated on even terms but silenced by force majeure. All this notwithstanding, Three Billboards was mostly received with enthusiasm by critics and audiences alike, much more so than one might reasonably expect of so serious-minded a film. What is more, its popular success, coupled with the warm public response to the plays that preceded it, leads me to suspect that its maker may come in time to be seen as the great dramatic poet of our angry age of tribalism. Having seen in his youth how tribal rivalry splintered the Irish soul, Martin McDonagh now writes plays and directs films of slangy eloquence and ugly beauty in which he seeks to persuade the rest of us to follow a more benign path—while we can.

Here Comes Whinin’ Simon

Paul Simon: The Life
By Robert Hilburn
Simon & Schuster, 449 pages
Reviewed by Edward Kosner

AS A MINSTREL, Paul Simon looked like a nebbish, wrote like a poet, and sang like a dream. Now in his mid-70s, he’s in the midst of a tour of 29 cities in the U.S., Canada, Scandinavia, Belgium, and the British Isles—his farewell to performing after more than five decades. He’s sold uncountable millions of records, contributed more than a dozen entries to the second Great American Song Book, been admitted to every imaginable musical hall of fame, and gotten so rich that he once reimbursed his record company more than a million dollars for a flop album. And yet, he can still be mopey after all these years.

Anyone who grew up Jewish in New York, especially in Manhattan and Queens in the 1940s and ’50s, would recognize Simon as a type: small, smart, with middle-class parents keen on assimilation, a schoolyard ball player, baseball-card collector, Yankee fan, drawn...
to folk music and doo-wop, just religious enough to have a bar mitzvah. Ralph Lauren’s father, Frank Lifshitz, was a housepainter in the Bronx. Paul Simon’s father, who had an exceptionally high IQ, played the string bass, led his own dance band at Roseland, and plucked in the house bands at CBS and NBC. His mother was an elementary-school teacher. When Simon wrote the line, “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?” he knew what he was talking about.

For all his accomplishments, Simon is not all that compelling beyond his music. That’s a problem for the readers of Paul Simon: The Life, the and-then-he-wrote-and-then-he-broke-up-with–Art Garfunkel—again new book by Robert Hilburn, a longtime pop-music critic for the Los Angeles Times. It’s an all-but-authorized biography based on hundreds of hours of interviews with Simon and access to many people close to him. If you want to know why Simon put the opaque line, “The cross is in the ballpark” in the song “The Obvious Child” on The Rhythm of the Saints, the album he made with the black drummers of Salvador in northeast Brazil, this is the book for you. If you want to feel you know Simon the way, for instance, readers of James Kaplan’s two-volume biography of Frank Sinatra feel they know Sinatra, you’ll have to wait.

Still, Simon’s progression from Kew Gardens Hills in deepest parochial Queens to the Valhalla of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is a story worth telling. His first musical epiphany, Hilburn writes, came in the summer he was 12. He wasn’t much interested in the piano lessons his father pressed on him or the novelty records and ballads like Jo Stafford’s “You Belong to Me” that dominated the pop-music stations. One day, he turned on the radio to hear Mel Allen calling a Yankee game and instead found a disk jockey playing “Gee,” an infectious doo-wop number by the Crows. Soon, he’d caught the Moonglows’ lilting “Sincerely,” and the Penguins’ “Earth Angel,” the love-sick teen anthem that’s still as evocative to those who heard it first as the madeleine was to Proust. He began singing the songs into a wire recorder with a kid with a sweet voice he’d first met in the fourth grade named Art Garfunkel. Later that year, he and Garfunkel teamed up to sing “Sh Boom,” the big hit by the Crew Cuts, at a school assembly. Simon had taken up the guitar and was star-struck by Elvis Presley. But at barely five-and-a-half feet, he knew that the rangy, stunning Elvis could never be his model. Instead, he settled on the Everly Brothers.

Paul Simon was star-struck by Elvis Presley. But at barely five-and-a-half feet, he knew that the rangy, stunning Elvis could never be his model. Instead, he settled on the Everly Brothers. He wrote a song called “Hey, Schoolgirl” with Garfunkel, made a $10 acetate copy at a recording studio, and began trying to peddle it. He was 16. A tiny record label named Big signed them up. Simon and Garfunkel were launched—except that their producer renamed them Tom and Jerry. Their first single sold some, but two later ones flopped, and Garfunkel went off to study architecture at Columbia. Simon spent hours back in Kew Gardens Hills, strumming his guitar in the dark in the bathroom where his music resonated off the tiles.

It’s just a stroke of genius from there to “Hello darkness, my old friend”—that was, of course, the first line of “The Sounds of Silence,” the 1963 song and album that transformed Tom and Jerry into Simon and Garfunkel. In between, Simon went to Queens College and patrolled the Brill building, hawking his own songs and earning pocket money singing other people’s on demo recordings. He also haunted the folk-music clubs in Greenwich Village, where he felt treated like an outsider because he hailed from bourgeois Queens rather than the Ozarks or the Dust Bowl. He fumed for years because he caught Bob Dylan giggling while Simon stretched one of his folk numbers. He played the folk clubs in Great Britain, too. At 22, he was a young old pro, savvy in the recording studio and on stage.

“The Sound of Silence,” later used as a motif in The Graduate, sold 3 million albums, and the hits just kept on coming. “I Am a Rock,” “Scarborough Fair,” “Homeward Bound,” “Mrs. Robinson,” “American,” “At the Zoo,” “Bridge over Troubled Waters,” “The Boxer.” In 1966, he made the equivalent of $2.35 million in today’s money. Four years later, the “Bridge” album sold 8 million copies. Two years after that, Simon and Garfunkel’s Great-
Simon never mastered musical notation, so he ‘composed’ by noodling on his guitar until he found an intriguing riff, polishing it, and then adding it to others until he had a melody.

**Est Hits** sold 14 million albums.

Watching those old performances on YouTube today, it's easy to see their appeal. Garfunkel has that adolescent, slightly androgynous look that enraptures young women and poses no threat to their boyfriends. His angelic voice mates with Simon's to produce a wistful innocence evocative of brave hope, lost love, and teen alienation. Off-stage, Garfunkel was churning with resentment. He'd never forgotten that Simon and their producer had gone behind his back in the Tom and Jerry days to record a solo single for Paul. Simon was obsessed with being short, and Garfunkel would taunt him: "I'll always be taller than you." The big break came over Garfunkel's budding movie career. Mike Nichols had cast both men in his 1970 film of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Garfunkel got fourth billing, Simon's scenes were cut. The next year, Nichols gave Garfunkel a major part in *Carnal Knowledge*. The filming in Mexico took forever while Simon seethed back in New York waiting to work on their next album. Over the next 40 years, they kept making up for special concerts and reunion tours, a late one with the Everly Brothers, who got along even worse than they did.

His standoff with Garfunkel mirrored Simon's lifelong pattern with women. His first real girlfriend was an unsophisticated British girl he met on tour and later dropped. He married his manager's ex-wife, divorced her, took up with the actress Shelley Duvall, then dumped her for Carrie Fisher. He and Fisher drove each other crazy for ten years, several as husband and wife. "Who told you to fall in love with an actress?" chided his father-in-law, Eddie Fisher. His third marriage, to the singer and songwriter Edie Brickell, who is more than two decades younger, has lasted for more than 25 years.

Post-Garfunkel, Simon literally reengineered himself as a solo performer. The detailed descriptions of how Simon made his new music are the most engaging parts of the book. He'd never mastered musical notation, so Simon "composed" by noodling on his guitar until he found an intriguing riff, polishing the fragment and then adding it to others until he had a melody. Only then would he try to add a lyric, struggling for weeks over a single line that came to mind while driving or retrieving phrases from scribbled notebooks. Over time, the straightforward language of his S & G songs gave way to Dylanish interjections: "The mama pajama rolled out of bed," "There's a girl in New York City / Who calls herself the human trampoline," "Song dogs barking at the break of dawn."

To give his sound more authenticity, he augmented the polished studio musicians he'd always used with more exotic players. For one album, he went to Jamaica to work with the ska and reggae band from Jimmy Cliff's albums. For another, he ventured down to Muscle Shoals in Alabama. He walked into the studio expecting to find black blues musicians and instead found a crew of down-home white guys. These forays paved the way for Simon's big breakthrough—his 1986 *Graceland* album recorded in South Africa with the strutting, exuberant Lady-smith Black Mambaza group and later performed in concert with the great Xhosa star Miriam Makeba and trumpeter Hugh Masakela.

*Graceland* stirred a furor because Simon broke the anti-apartheid boycott against performing in South Africa, but it was a commercial and artistic triumph, with such numbers as "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes," "The Boy in the Bubble," and the title song, a meditation on a visit to the Presley shrine. Simon had now become a leading popularizer of world music, a genre that was slow to win American fans. Four years later, he enlisted the throbbing Brazilian drummers for *The Rhythm of the Saints*, another exotic smash. It's poignant to watch Simon in his dashikis or the frenetic drummers on the pastel Pelourinho Square in Bahia. None of them looks like Garfunkel, and Simon looks about as happy as he can manage.

Throughout his career, Simon battled his own recurrent sadness. He self-medicated by taking the show on the road or into the studio, where he could spend days with musicians perfecting tiny chunks of fresh sound that he would accumulate like Lego blocks and ultimately assemble into a song. No popular musician of our time worked as hard or evolved as much. And yet he's never managed to transcend the emotional resonance of those half-century-old Simon and Garfunkel reveries.
month, when Phil Donahue asked him about his marriage, Clinton pouted. “It’s none of your business if we did [separate],” he said. “We’re going to sit here a long time in silence, Phil. I’m not going to answer any more of these questions. I’ve answered them until I’m blue in the face.” Clinton had not, in fact, answered “these questions.” But his expressions of hurt and victimhood were enough to satisfy his voters and wave off less spirited interviewers.

On June 14, 1993, after introducing Supreme Court nominee Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the White House Rose Garden, Clinton ended the event in a huff and was stomping back inside when Brit Hume asked, “The withdrawal of the [Lani] Guinier nomination, sir, and your apparent focus on Judge Breyer, and your late turn, it seems, to Judge Ginsburg, may have created an impression, perhaps unfair, of a certain zigzag quality in the decision-making process here.”

According to a contemporaneous account in the New York Times, “Mr. Clinton shot back, steely-eyed: ‘I have long since given up the thought that I could disabuse some of you of turning any substantive decision into anything but a political process. How you could ask a question like that after the statement she just made is beyond me.’ Bill Clinton being political—perish the thought!

In 1996, Clinton blew up an event on the subject of the economy when a reporter from a conservative outlet asked him if the White House would reimburse the legal expenses of a travel-office employee who had been unfairly dismissed. “Are we going to pay the legal expenses of every person in America who is ever acquitted of an offense?” Clinton asked. But reporter Adam Nagourney found “his voice even and steely,” as Clinton “plunged his hands into his pockets, rejecting a suggestion that he urge the Senate to proceed on stalled legislation that would reimburse the employees.”

Clinton’s hands did not stay in his pockets for long, of course. What was perhaps his most infamous flare-up occurred in 1998, early on in the Lewinsky scandal, when during a White House event he pounded the lectern, his mouth contorted into a rictus of exasperation and outrage, and said: “I’m going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie. Not a single time. Never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the American people.” By August of that year, however, exposed as a liar and cheat, Clinton assumed a pose that was less defiant and more contrite.

Clinton had fewer occasions to reveal his fire and fury during the post-presidential years, when the media had little reason to criticize his charitable work and paid speeches. Every so often, though, the nastiness poked through. In 2004, when Peter Jennings mentioned that historians rated him low for “moral leadership,” Clinton responded, “You don’t want to go here, Peter. You don’t want to go here. Not after what you people did, and the way you, your network, what you did with Kenneth Starr, the way your people repeated every little sleazy thing he leaked.”

In 2006, when Chris Wallace asked about his spotty record against Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, Clinton looked like he was about to either have a coronary or commit murder. “So you did Fox’s bidding on this show,” he said. “You did your nice little conservative hit job on me.” He went on: “And you’ve got that little smirk on your face and you think you’re so clever. But I had responsibility for trying to protect this country. I tried and I failed to get bin Laden. I regret it. But I did try. And I did everything I thought I responsibly could.”

When some Democrats and the press criticized Bill Clinton for what were called racially insensitive comments in 2008, he played true to form, scolding reporters for daring to question him. Referring to the Obama campaign, he said, “They’re feeding you this because they know this is what you want to cover. This is what you live for....They just spin you up on this and you happily go along.” And: “Shame on you.”

What made the Melvin interview different was the response to the president’s ire. This time his rage failed to bully the crowd into submission. No one backed down. Instead Clinton found himself offering additional, and additionally confusing, explanations. Long out of office, his wife having failed to stop Donald Trump, Clinton suddenly was without allies in the media or in politics. “He sounded incapable of owning anything,” said one shocked MSNBC anchor. It took Craig Melvin and the #MeToo movement for the political class to recognize Bill Clinton for what he is. Better late than never.
ON JUNE 4, NBC’s Today Show aired an interview with former president Bill Clinton and James Patterson, co-authors of a new political thriller. Craig Melvin, an affable newsreader, started off with some questions about the book. Then came the plot twist: Melvin asked Clinton if the former president had ever apologized to Monica Lewinsky.

Melvin did something others have been too polite, too afraid, or too partisan to do. According to a database search, over the last decade not a single television interviewer has asked Clinton about Lewinsky directly. The closest was one reporter who wondered, during the 2016 election, whether President Clinton’s past was “fair game.” (Clinton didn’t think so.) How Melvin expected the president to respond, we do not know. But what happened next made for riveting television. For Clinton behaved the same way he always has when confronted by uncomfortable facts, difficult situations, and challenges to his pristinely cultivated sense of righteousness. He exploded.

Clinton’s eyes bulged, his cheeks went red, his lower lip jutted out. He began to perform his ritual dance around the truth. “I apologized to everybody in the world,” he said. But “I have not talked to her.” He evaded the question: “I had a sexual-harassment policy when I was governor in the ’80s.” That sexual-harassment policy must have contained some loopholes.

Clinton played the “everybody does it” card. “You think President Kennedy should have resigned? Do you believe President Johnson should have resigned?” He accused Melvin of ignorance and malice: “You, typically, have ignored gaping facts.” He condescended: “I bet you don’t even know them.” And he attacked his interlocutor: “Someone should ask you these questions.”

It was an incredible sight, a classic in the annals of the Clinton temper tantrum. What made the eruption all the more memorable was its throwback nature. Clinton’s ballistic anger at reporters who dare to ask tough questions was a regular feature of his presidency. Heated, spastic, self-pitying denunciations of media insolence were among his favorite tactics to intimidate reporters and garner sympathy from his electoral base. During the exchange with Melvin, we caught a glimpse of the president’s old self.

The fiery side of Clinton’s personality was apparent as early as the 1992 campaign. In March of that year, during a Democratic primary debate, he got into a shouting match with California governor Jerry Brown, who had raised the issue of cronyism. Deflecting reports that he had directed state contracts to Hillary Clinton’s law firm, Clinton told Brown, “I don’t care what you say about me. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for jumping on my wife. You’re not worth being on the same platform as my wife.”

The following continued on page 79
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