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Politics & Ideas

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Resistance Porn
To the Editor:

Yuval Levin has laid out concisely the important but often-ignored subject of congressional authority and the problems plaguing our legislative branch (“Congress Is Weak Because Its Members Want It to Be Weak,” July/August).

Although I agree almost entirely with Mr. Levin’s analysis, I disagree slightly with how he frames the matter. The article’s description of the current imbalance of power between the three branches lends credence to the idea that presidential overreach is not so much overstated as it is not fully realized. If the primary obstacle keeping the current president from acting with the same executive aggression as his predecessor is his own incompetence rather than the checks on power afforded by the constitution, then we’ve reached a critical point in keeping executive power in check. This is true even if abuses thus far have been somewhat limited.

The constitutional means by which Congress may wrest back power still exist, but there is little incentive to use them, and Congress is now characterized by widespread preference for partisan politics over actual governance. If something doesn’t change soon, there is little assurance that a president with a tangible agenda who is more attuned to the weakness of Congress and the power that affords him would be kept in check should more serious abuses occur.

Erica Krzywonski
South Padre Island, Texas

Yuval Levin writes:

I appreciate Erica Krzywonski’s thoughtful letter and certainly share her concern. In fact, it seems to me that the Obama era provided all the evidence we might need of the problem she describes. President Trump has not abused his power over Congress in the same way his predecessor did mostly because he seems incapable of the discipline and focus that would require. That is hardly reassuring, as she notes. The structural, systemic problem remains. This president probably would not (or would not be able to) stand in the way of a congressional attempt to address that problem, however, so that in the Trump era, such reforms are more imaginable than they might be later. That means the time for action is now. But the missing ingredient is the will among members of Congress to reassert the prerogatives of their institution. The first step toward helping Congress supply that missing ingredient is to see that this is the problem—that is, that Congress is weak because...
its members want it to be. That’s why my essay sought to shed light on this peculiar fact. But as Ms. Krzywonski wisely notes, this is only the first and easiest step in the effort to rescue the balance of powers required for our constitutional system to function.

Understanding the Shah

To the Editor:

SOHRAB AHMARI’S “Game of Peacock Thrones” was very perceptive in its analysis of the Iranian mindset (July/August). Iranians of Shah Reza Pahlavi’s era desired continuity with their own celebrated ancient past, and Iranians today share their dreams of nationalism, separate from the Ayatollahs’ Velayat-e Faqih (rule of the jurisprudent).

The shah continues to be misunderstood, as illustrated by scholar Ronald Wintrobe, who, in his book The Political Economy of Dictatorship, refers to the shah as a “tinpot” ruler and a vampire. According to Wintrobe, the shah was interested only in the accumulation of personal wealth at his citizens’ expense. This is a misreading of the shah’s admittedly extravagant lifestyle. Always contradictory, the shah lived in a style he assumed normal or appropriate for a king, a planet apart from most Iranians, to be sure, yet he desired prosperity for his nation most of all.

The shah sincerely loved his people, but his paranoia and delusions accelerated his downfall. He saw foreign conspiracies behind ever occurrence; he even imagined Western support for the Ayatollah Khomeini. In truth, Khomeini suc-
Roth’s Complaint

To the Editor:

IN HER OTHERWISE excellent essay on Philip Roth’s work, Ruth R. Wisse makes a mistake in her concluding paragraphs. She asserts that “Roth never graciously accepted his designation as a Jewish writer, nor much less any implicit responsibility or empathy for the Jews and Israel.” She asks, “What was he denying?”

In order to reach this conclusion, Mrs. Wisse would have to focus solely on Roth’s early defensiveness, while ignoring the Yiddishkeit running through everything that Roth wrote thereafter, including his several essays on the Jews. Mrs. Wisse has put herself, willingly or not, in the position of Rabbi David Seligson who attacked Roth for his “caricature” of Epstein, a Jewish adulterer who featured in one of Roth’s stories. In “Writing About Jews,” an essay published in the December 1963 issue of Commentary, Roth wrote that Rabbi Seligson was not able to admit “that the character of Epstein happened to have been conceived with considerable affection and empathy.” He added, “As I see it, the rabbi cannot recognize a bear hug when one is being administered right in front of his eyes.” What’s more, Roth didn’t hesitate to refer to himself as “this Jewish writer.”

Perhaps his most explicit statement on the matter is to be found in his essay “On Portnoy’s Complaint.” In it, Roth wrote: “The fact is that I have always been far more pleased by my good fortune in being born a Jew than my critics may imagine. It’s a complicated, interesting, morally demanding singular experience, and I like that I find myself in the historic predicament of being Jewish, with all its implications. Who could ask for more?”

It may not be too much to say that Philip Roth addressed the 20th-century Jewish-American reality more thoughtfully, more realistically, and more sympathetically than any of his contemporaries. Roth loved the Jews, even though he did not pray with them. And as a Jew, I must say that I prefer Roth’s “bear hug” to Malamud’s fabulism and even to Bellow’s tragicomic analyses.

Herbert M. Wyman
New York City

Ruth R. Wisse writes:

I appreciate Herbert M. Wyman’s championship of his favored writer. I never doubted that Roth was pleased to have been born Jewish— it was his only good subject. The Torah is famously “a tree of life” for those who cling to it; for Roth, a “predicament.” This necessarily limited what he could do with the subject.

Sohrab Ahmari writes:

I thank Clinton L. Ervin for his letter and kind words. He has a remarkably sharp read on the character of Iran’s last monarch. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi did sincerely love his country. He was also, as Mr. Ervin notes, utterly out of touch with his people, delusional, indecisive, weak. As a son of Iran, I can’t help but rue his downfall and imagine what might have been if the shah had had some of his father’s steeliness. A practical question for today is, Does Reza Pahlavi, the exiled grandson who is fast emerging as the most plausible opposition leader, possess some of that Pahlavi steel? We shall see.

Clinton L. Ervin
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Roth’s Complaint

Letters: October 2018
PEOPLE HAVE BEEN PADDING their résumés since the job interview was invented, but politicians have a special affinity for the practice. During a campaign appearance in the 1980s, when Joe Biden was running for president, he claimed he was in the “top half” of his class in law school; he had graduated 76th out of 85 students. Others engage in the act of “stolen valor”—lying about or exaggerating their military service—such as Senator Richard Blumenthal, who claimed he was in Vietnam when in fact he actively avoided service. And in August, Melissa Howard, a Republican running for the state legislature in Florida, went so far as to pose for a picture with her college diploma on Twitter to bolster her résumé claims—until her supposed alma mater, Miami University of Ohio, outed her as a fake, prompting her withdrawal from the race.

Not all countries let their fabulist politicians off so easily. In 2012 in Norway, a Progressive Party member who went on to serve as a government health-care bureaucrat was jailed for more than a year and given a large fine when she was found to have lied about having earned a nursing degree.

Americans are more forgiving, perhaps assuming that all politicians embellish personal histories for political gain. But in recent years, a new species of political boaster has emerged, one who relies less on line items on his résumé than on telling the right sort of woke story. The origin of this species of identity-inflator can be traced not to a politician but to Rachel Dolezal, the president of a local Washington-state NAACP chapter who, a few years ago, was revealed to be white. Her refusal to recant her false race claims and her eagerness to coopt the language of identity politics to defend that choice—“I identify as an African-American woman,” she repeatedly told as many news outlets as would listen—was not the moment identity politics became farce. It was the moment it reached its logical conclusion. Dolezal went on to write a memoir and star in a Netflix documentary (and face charges of welfare fraud), but through it all she hasn’t altered her claim that she identifies as a black woman.

Dolezal isn’t the first progressive to practice identity inflation. Senator Elizabeth Warren was an early innovator of the art, back when she was a law professor and claiming Native-American heritage even though no one in her family is a member of a tribe. Donald Trump relentlessly belittles Warren for her claim, calling her “Pocahontas.” And although she has denounced Trump’s remarks as racist, Warren has tacitly conceded the criticism, quietly trying to repair her image as she prepares to run for president in 2020. She has admitted she lacks tribal membership and has sponsored legislation aimed at Native Americans, as well as making an apology tour that involved a lot of glad-handing of tribal leaders.

But she hasn’t backed down from her fakery so much as leaned into it. She insists that her fibbing about her own identity has had a beneficial trickle-
down effect for real Native Americans. “I’m here today to make a promise: Every time someone brings up my family’s story, I’m going to use it to lift up the story of your families and your communities,” Warren told the National Congress of American Indians earlier this year. She might have given up claiming to be a Native American herself, but post-Pocahontas Warren still sees political value in claiming proximity to this history of oppression.

Even Warren can’t compete with the embodiment of identity politics in extremis: Julia Salazar. A 27-year-old candidate for a New York state senate seat from a district in Brooklyn, Salazar is running as a Democratic Socialist and has been hailed by the left as the immediate sequel to summer sensation Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who has endorsed her): a young energetic woman with an impeccable lefty narrative.

Salazar claims to be a half-Jewish immigrant from Colombia (she once ran an “intersectional blog” for an anti-Zionist, pro-BDS group). On the campaign trail, she has spoken at length of her working-class roots. But according to Tablet, which published a damning exposé of Salazar in August, it’s all a lie. “Based on interviews with former acquaintances and an examination of her writings, social-media postings, and publicly available documents,” Armin Rosen writes, “it is an identity that is no less convincing for having been largely self-created.” Meanwhile, her earlier iteration as an undergraduate at her homonymous college, Columbia, was as a pro-life, pro-Israel Christian, and her “hardscrabble” childhood included private school, boats, jet skis, and maids, according to her brother.

But Salazar, who once appeared on Glenn Beck’s show but now wants to abolish ICE and legalize prostitution, has faced few repercussions for her lies. New York magazine says many of Salazar’s supporters think the stories outlining her fabrications are just a conspiracy “pushed by real-estate interests.” Listening to her energetically spin her lies is like watching a dystopian reimagining of an Up with People performance. Everyone in the audience is smiling and singing along, but they all seem to know that something is a little off.

Conservatives play at their own version of identity politics, of course. But they tend to complain about the abandonment of American identity rather than its tribal excesses—such as the recent overreaction to news that First Man, a movie about Neil Armstrong’s Apollo 11 moon landing, doesn’t include a scene of Armstrong’s planting the American flag.

Republican politicians usually claim they are successful because of how America works, while liberals claim they are successful in spite of how America works, as if they are lucky outliers who bucked the system they now want to change. This is why a progressive candidate can’t acknowledge having been raised by an airline pilot (Salazar) or an architect (Ocasio-Cortez), or bear the shame of lacking an oppressed minority on the family tree (Warren)—it all sounds too privileged. Instead they hide the jet skis and pretend to have been raised by immigrant single moms or to be descended from Native-American warrior-princesses.

Why? Because legitimacy on the left now flows from finding and securing one’s place on the identity hierarchy—and it’s a greasy pole to climb. As Francis Fukuyama argues in his new book, Identity, “demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today.” Even if you exaggerate your struggle or fudge the details, this logic suggests, you’re still a useful soldier in the progressive army as long as you have the armor of your (oppressed) identity. Amplified by social-media echo chambers, this version of identity politics views its avatars as always being on the right side of history, if not of fact.

But what happens when (as the left has claimed for decades), the personal is political but the personal turns out to be an elaborate lie? What does that mean for politics? If the melting pot is all a big con, how does a heterogeneous society survive? What are the new litmus tests in this age of self-creation? Can you lie about military service and about race and about growing up poor but not about being transgender?

The Identity Grift : October 2018

What happens when the personal is political but the personal turns out to be an elaborate lie? What does that mean for politics? If the melting pot is all a big con, how does a heterogeneous society survive? What are the new litmus tests in this age of self-creation? Can you lie about military service and about race and about growing up poor but not about being transgender?
IT WASN’T THE REEMERGENCE of Lanny Davis this summer that came as a surprise. “Davis you will always have with you,” the New Testament tells us, and here in Washington his presence is taken as a fact of life, as compulsory as the malarial summers or the raising of the debt ceiling. No, what is surprising about Lanny’s resuscitation is how rocky it was—how lacking in professional élan. People don’t hire Davis to make trouble but to stop trouble in its tracks.

For those who aren’t familiar with him—who are you people anyway?—Lanny Davis is a veteran Washington lobbyist and spokesman-for-hire. In July, he signed on with Donald Trump’s former lawyer, Michael Cohen, when Cohen revealed that he was going to sing like Beverly Sills in front of Robert Mueller, the special counsel. “On July 2,” Davis told Judy Woodruff on PBS, “Mr. Cohen declared his independence, first by going on ABC and then by hiring me.”

Davis first popped out of the Washington public-relations dogpile in the 1990s when he left his million-dollar-a-year partnership at a white-shoe firm to serve as a second-tier spokesman for President Clinton. As one scandal after another engulfed the president—and, by osmosis, his wife, staff, reelection committee, and political party—Davis was suddenly everywhere. You couldn’t throw a brick through a TV screen without shattering a picture of Lanny splitting hairs and blowing smoke.

Opinions differed on how good Davis was at his job. For what it’s worth, I was in awe of him. But no one failed to be impressed by his superhuman ability to take abuse, sometimes from an impatient reporter but mostly from his president and a White House that unloaded one garbage truck after another on top of him, dumping heaps of unsavory facts or incriminating documents he was then expected to make suitable for public release. No embarrassment was too great for him to endure, so long as it was in service of the man from a place called Hope.

Davis’s first big assignment was to tend reporters while they tried, with varying degrees of ardor, to gauge the depth and breadth of illicit fundraising for the president’s 1996 reelection campaign. The outrageous behavior of Clinton’s fundraising operation was jaw-dropping, or should have been—and if it is now largely forgotten, we have Lanny Davis’s artistry to thank.

The motive force was the unquenchable thirst of Clinton and his party for campaign cash. This led them to hold a kind of silent auction of presidential perks and power in anticipation of the 1996 election. You could bid for big-tickets items like a sleepover in the Lincoln bedroom or a modest coffee klatch with the president, and it didn’t much matter who “you” were. Even the Communist Chinese sluiced money into the Clinton reelection campaign, using a labyrinth of back channels run by shady intermediaries. And the Clintonites, including the president himself, grabbed the money with both hands and asked for more. It was unheard of—a foreign power trying to undermine the sacred process of American Democracy? It can happen here!

Senate Republicans called a series of public hearings, and Lanny was there, day after day, pacing outside the hearing rooms, waiting to spin reporters during breaks and recesses. He was an early and literal-minded practitioner of whataboutism. After a

Andrew Ferguson is a senior editor at the Weekly Standard and the author of Crazy U and Land of Lincoln.
morning session that revealed the scummy maneuverings of yet another Clinton surrogate, we reporters would emerge from the hearing room ready for a shower—and instead would find Lanny, fully clothed, waving a sheaf of photocopies that might show illicit funding of congressional campaigns. “What about Congress? What about Congress?” he would shout, standing on tiptoes amid the passing crowd like a 19th-century newspaper boy. “When will the committee investigate Congress? When?” Indigities came naturally to him. He’d always be back the next day, ready for more.

Behind the scenes, Davis was a maestro of the “document dump”—scattering potentially damaging documents among a massive pile of routine bureaucratic detritus and then releasing the lot late on a Friday night or early Saturday morning, when fagged-out reporters lacked the energy to make a ruckus. In this way, he gave new life to the phrase “old news.” Davis could leak a troublesome piece of evidence to a favored reporter, who broke the story in such a way that other reporters would be disinclined to follow it up with their own investigation. When at last some other news-shoulder tumbled to the importance of the information, Davis could dismiss it as old news—a random morsel already digested by the news-gathering beast and flushed out as uninteresting or insignificant.

Over time Davis grew to become a master of the capital’s complicated etiquette of sourcing. I remember finding him one afternoon in the usual scrum of reporters outside the hearing room. “Who are you?” one of the reporters asked.

Davis thought for a moment. “For this,” he said, “I’m a White House official, okay?” High-ranking? he was asked—for sometimes Davis would be called high-ranking; other times a source close to the White House.

“Not necessary,” Davis said, and then revealed, on background, a piece of information that everybody knew. He went on to announce that this president and this White House were taking a “wait-and-see” posture toward the hearings but—quite frankly—they were disappointed in Republican partisanship.

The scrum disbanded but soon a reporter returned. “Lanny,” he said, “that thing about the wait-and-see attitude—is that on the record?” A moment’s hesitation. “That’s on the record,” Davis acknowledged. The reporter turned and the White House official followed him. “But not that first thing!”

A veteran of such elaborate protocols would not expect to make the kind of mistake that Davis has made this summer. Not long after Cohen hired Davis in July, CNN had a scoop. It quoted anonymous sources saying Cohen was prepared to tell Mueller that Donald Trump had known beforehand about a 2016 meeting between his son Donald Jr. and Russian operatives. For enthusiasts of the Russian-collusion scandal, this was big news. Other outlets rushed to confirm it, and did.

Davis denied that he was the anonymous source behind the story. After several weeks, though, he admitted he was. Moreover, we learned that when other news outlets sought to verify the Cohen story, they did so by asking Davis, who confirmed it—off the record, of course. But that’s not all! To round things off, Davis finally admitted that the original story he had leaked to CNN wasn’t even true: Cohen in fact knew nothing about Trump’s knowledge of the Russia meeting.

It isn’t often in official Washington that lies reveal themselves in such purity: a lie doubling back on itself, a lie in service of another lie. Washington folklore tells us that an outright lie will ruin the reputation of a man in Davis’s line of work. Lies are essential to the craft, of course, but only lies of a certain kind; they must work by misdirection, omission, strategic silence, or obscurantism.
SOCIALISM IS ON THE MARCH! It’s just that nobody quite knows what it is. A Gallup poll in August found that 57 percent of Democrats said they view socialism positively, while only 47 percent had a favorable view of capitalism. Only 16 percent of Republicans thought well of socialism. Findings like this—along with other polls showing socialism’s support among millennials generally as well as the sudden celebrity of avowed socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez after her stunning defeat of fourth-ranked Democratic House leader Joseph Crowley in a New York primary—have invited waves of op-eds crashing across the waterfront: What is socialism? Why can’t we have it? Why we will have it!

In a piece called “It’s Time to Reclaim ‘Socialism’ from the Dirty-Word Category,” the Washington Post’s Elizabeth Bruenig says, “Clarifying exactly what ‘socialism’ means once and for all likely holds the Asness Chair in Applied Liberty at the American Enterprise Institute. This essay builds on themes and ideas from his latest book, Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy, as well as from his 2010 Commentary piece ‘What Kind of Socialist Is Barack Obama?’

BY JONAH GOLDBERG

An explanation for the enduring power of very bad ideas

SOCIALISM IS SO HOT RIGHT NOW
won’t happen anytime soon.” One common tactic is to point to countries that liberals like and dub them real-world models of socialism. Thus Scandinavian countries with generous social safety nets become the real-world proof that socialism works. Others will just point to government-run programs or institutions—national parks, the VA, whatever—and say “socialism!” (What about Venezuela? “Shut up,” they explain.)

Corey Robin, in a New York Times op-ed, acknowledges that definitions have always been a burden for American socialists. He notes that the best definition Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, editors of the socialist journal Dissent, could come up with in 1954 was “socialism is the name of our desire.” The “true vision” of socialism, Robin says, is simply “freedom.” Robin objects to the way we must enter the market in order to live—since we need to work if we are to eat. “The socialist argument against capitalism isn’t that it makes us poor,” he writes. “It’s that it makes us unfree.” If you can get past the utopianism—where in the world has it ever been true that most people did not need to work in order to live? How do you create a society where work is optional?—there’s much to admire about the honesty of this definition.

This is because socialism has never been a particularly stable or coherent program, a point I made in these pages in 2010.* It has always been best defined as whatever socialists want it to be at any given moment. That is because its chief utility is as a romantic indictment of the capitalist status quo. As many of the defenders of the new socialist craze admit, socialism is the off-the-shelf alternative to capitalism, which has been in bad odor since at least the financial crisis of 2008. “For millennials,” writes the Huffington Post’s Zach Carter, “‘capitalism’ means ‘unaccountable rich people ripping off the world,’ while ‘socialism’ simply means ‘not that.’”

“Listen to today’s socialists, and you’ll hear less the language of poverty than of power,” Robin says. He’s right. But this has always been the case. As a matter of practical politics, socialism’s durability as a concept owes almost nothing to economics and almost everything to the desire for power—power for the poor, for the left-out, for the “workers of the world”—and for the intellectuals who claim to speak for them. In countries experimenting with what Friedrich Hayek called “hot socialism,” the transfer of power from one set of elites to another was bloody and total (and no one, save those at the top of the new system, experienced much of the freedom Robin describes). In countries that have pursued “soft socialism” of the Western European varieties instead, power shifted primarily to bureaucrats and politicians—but these managerial classes managed to work well enough with other elites and recognized that their long-term interests were best protected by subsidizing not the poor but middle-class voters instead, mostly in the form of trade unions and government workers. The cost for this kind of socialism is typically a few points of GDP growth and the sort of sclerotic, corporatist economy that invites populist uprisings at the mere hint of reform and makes integration of immigrants much more difficult.

But to talk about socialism as a function of practical politics means gliding past its underlying appeal. After all, there are countless other ideologies that can be similarly reduced to the desire for power expressed by certain elites or certain segments of the aggrieved masses themselves. The most obvious example is, of course, nationalism, which has more in common with socialism than is ordinarily believed. From the French Jacobins to the Italian Fascists, nationalists tend to be in favor of state-directed economics, the redistribution of wealth, and a collectivist or communal organization of society.

What unites all of these movements is a sense that liberal democratic capitalism doesn’t provide a

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Socialism Is So Hot Right Now : October 2018
sense of social solidarity. It is too atomizing, too cutthroat, and mostly unconcerned with how we should all live together. These critiques came in response to both the chaos and the promise that accompanied the spread of the industrial revolution. The dislocations that characterized modernization, urbanization, and industrialization unleashed widespread discontent not simply with economic conditions—even though people were, on the whole, getting richer—but with social and political arrangements as well. Say what you will about the old rule of throne and altar; everyone knew his place in God’s design. It should be no wonder that the collapse of the old order was marked with a certain amount of nostalgia for the stability of ancient regimes.

For intellectuals, politicians, and clergy across an incredibly diverse ideological landscape, convinced that the new democratic and commercial age left much to be desired, the debate over how people should live could be summarized in a single phrase, “The Social Question.”

Thousands of books, speeches, law-review articles, sermons, and debates centered on “the Social Question,” often without explicitly defining it because everyone knew what it was asking, even if they had trouble articulating it. John Ruskin, one of the leading intellectuals (and the premier art critic) of the Victorian era, defined the Social Question thus:

Given a number of human beings, with a certain development of physical and mental faculties and of social institutions, in command of given natural resources, how can they best utilize these powers for the attainment of the most complete satisfaction?

For the broad and diverse socialist faction, this was largely a question of economic arrangements. The old system dominated by exploitive aristocrats deserved to be interred, but the idea that it should be replaced by a new aristocracy of wealth did not seem much better. The solution lay in following through on the democratic and populist project, by giving not just political power to the people but economic power as well.

It was with this in mind that the economist Sidney Webb drafted Clause IV of the British Labour Party’s constitution in 1918. It read:

To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common owner-

Commentary
we cannot achieve alone. It is how I try to live my life, how you try to live yours—the simple truths—I am worth no more than anyone else, I am my brother’s keeper, I will not walk by on the other side. We are not simply people set in isolation from one another, face to face with eternity, but members of the same family, same community, same human race. This is my socialism and the irony of all our long years in opposition is that those values are shared by the vast majority of the British people.

Blair was here revising socialism into something he called “social-ism” instead. Many hard core and doctrinaire socialists balked at all this, but Blair was on to something. Socialism as a thoroughgoing system had failed. But the central emotion behind it had not. And that emotion has only deepened in the two-plus decades since Blair spoke. Millennials who supported Bernie Sanders almost certainly don’t care about the weedy specifics of his health-care plans. They do not want to live in a country with an economic system that could never have produced the iPhone or the Internet. What they want is a greater sense of social solidarity. They detest the idea that the “1 percent” is racing so far ahead of the rest of the pack.

Capitalism—at least as Sanders & Co. understand it—is not fulfilling. It doesn't provide a sense of meaning and solidarity. It rewards—in their minds—the few and punishes the many. There must be a better, more humane way, in which we’re all in it together and sacrifice is shared. The word “social” comes from the Latin socii, meaning allies. People want to feel that they are allied with one another, fighting toward a common goal together for the good of the tribe, marching to the same drumbeats. This is innate in us. Our tribal brains crave social solidarity every bit as much as our palates crave foods that are sweet, fatty, or salty. We can train ourselves to resist the cravings or channel them toward productive ends. But very few of us can eliminate the craving itself. And the socialists have a point. The problem is that the central government in a sprawling country of over 325 million can't provide solidarity (without resorting to anti-democratic means)—only the institutions of civil society (faith, family, etc.) can fill the holes in our souls.

The Harvard historian Richard Pipes argued that Bolshevism and fascism were both “heresies of socialism.” In a sense, socialism itself is a heresy of social-ism. Doctrinaire or applied socialism is what you get when you try to apply a romantic abstraction to the real world. Similarly, love is an abstraction, a Platonic ideal. The shadow it casts in the real world often takes the form of marriage. There are many great and enduring marriages, but even the most happily married men or women will readily concede that the reality feels a lot different from the fantasy.

Think about how unhappily married men describe marriage. They feel as if their wives “don’t understand them.” They want to feel more respected, desired, and manly. They follow the drumbeats of extramarital attraction in search of a fantasy that is more exciting and authentic. Capitalism engenders a similar midlife crisis in many people. They reject the routine and boredom for the dream of something better or perfect that they rarely find.

WHEN I USE THE TERM “social-ism,” people tend to snicker. Too clever by half, seems to be the common reaction (and a common criticism of Tony Blair). Fortunately, there's another term that does not invite snickers and that, at least in its original usage, is essentially synonymous with social-ism: “social justice.”

It’s worth taking a moment to understand where the term actually comes from. Social justice, as a concept, was introduced (some would say reintroduced) by the Catholic Church, specifically in an 1840 trea-
tise by the moral theologian Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio. Taparelli was concerned that with the growing popularity of various social-contract theories of the 19th century, people might lose sight of the “social fact” of humanity. Simply put, we humans are social beings. We are born into families and live in communities. An individual belongs to more institutions—more “societies”—than just the state. So there isn’t one civil society; rather, there are many civil societies. And those societies maintain a level of autonomy apart from that of the state. This idea has formed the bedrock of Christianity and Western concepts of civil society ever since Jesus insisted that Christians must “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”

The associations outside the state—family, church—serve to inoculate and protect the individual from the state. So long as these associations respect the role and sovereignty of the state in its functions, the state in turn has a responsibility not to “destroy the inner unity” of those associations, but rather to respect their freedom and autonomy within the society. In other words, the government cannot trample the structure of social ecosystems that makes life worthwhile.

Taparelli felt the need to stress this important division of social functions because the state in the 19th century was intruding on what Edmund Burke dubbed “the little platoons” of civil society. When the Obama administration told nuns that they must pay for birth control or attempted to cleanse the Church from the adoption business, the state was doing precisely what Taparelli had condemned 170 years earlier. “Social justice” back then had little, if anything, to do with efforts to redistribute wealth, never mind any of the more extravagant or fanciful objectives on the social-justice agenda today.

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical Rerum Novarum on the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor, which incorporated this new thinking on social justice. What makes the document so important is how it tried to split the difference between capitalism and socialism. Leo argued that capitalism was too cruel and atomizing. But he also argued that socialism was too contrary to natural law. Man is, by God’s natural law, a social animal in need of his fellow man, the Church asserted. “The consciousness of his own weakness urges man to call in aid from without. We read in the pages of holy Writ: ‘It is better that two should be together than one; for they have the advantage of their society. If one fall he shall be supported by the other. Woe to him that is alone, for when he falleth he hath none to lift him up.’”

What was required was a new (or rather old but forgotten) social contract that bound together not just individuals, but institutions and the state alike. The Church found such an arrangement in the old guild system:

History attests what excellent results were brought about by the artificers’ guilds of olden times. They were the means of affording not only many advantages to the workmen, but in no small degree of promoting the advancement of art, as numerous monuments remain to bear witness. Such unions should be suited to the requirements of this our age—an age of wider education, of different habits, and of far more numerous requirements in daily life. It is gratifying to know that there are actually in existence not a few associations of this nature, consisting either of workmen alone, or of workmen and employers together, but it were greatly to be desired that they should become more numerous and more efficient.

The primary modern example of guilds, according to the Church, was the labor union. It is this fact, perhaps more than any other, that led to the term “social justice” being taken up by organized labor around
the world. The constitution of the AFL-CIO proclaims, “The AFL-CIO is an organization of people who work. We help lead a movement for social and economic justice in America and the world.”

And while this is all perfectly fine as far as it goes, what has been forgotten is that the Church did not solely have labor unions in mind when it invoked the guild system of medieval Europe. The guilds were cartels set up not strictly by laborers but by producers. Among other things, they barred competition, dictated what consumers could legally buy, set prices, and, perhaps most perniciously stifled innovation.

What the Church favored was not a free-market society with strong labor rights and collective bargaining. What it wanted was a more ordered society where elite institutions (corporations) reprised the ancient social order—a social order in which the state, the aristocracy, the church, and the guilds all together guided and directed the lower classes toward a more unified and holistic society. Such a system is called “corporatism.” It was the core economic doctrine of Italian Fascism and, for a time, German National Socialism. Ten years before *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius set up a commission of Church officials and outside intellectuals to study the idea of corporatism. They defined it as a system of social organization that has at its base the grouping of men according to the community of their natural interests and social functions, and as true and proper organs of the state they direct and coordinate labor and capital in matters of common interest.

As a form of social organization—as opposed to an ideological doctrine—corporatism is far, far older than either socialism or capitalism, as Howard Wiarda documents in his book *Corporatism and Comparative Politics: The Other Great Ism*. It is and has been a standard form of government all around the world. Indeed, corporatism is the form of government of nearly all “natural states,” to borrow a term from Douglass North in his seminal *Violence and Social Orders*. “In the earliest societies of recorded human history, priests and politicians provided the redistributive network capable of mobilizing output and redistributing it between elites and non-elites,” North writes. “In a natural state, each of the nonmilitary elites either controls or enjoys privileged access to a vital function like religion, production, community allocation of resources, justice, trade, or education.”

North differentiates natural states from “open-access societies.” These are what we would call modern societies like our own (for now), where the legitimate use of violence is monopolized by the state and where economic institutions are open to individuals regardless of status from birth. In open-access societies, rules are written impersonally, which is to say that all are equal in the eyes of the law, and people have a right to form associations that are independent of state intervention so long as they adhere to the basic rules of the system. “Perhaps 25 countries and 15 percent of the world’s population live in open-access societies today,” North writes. “The other 175 countries and 85 percent live in natural states.”

Despite the fact that corporatism is an ancient system, it keeps getting a new lease on life as an exciting “third way.” That is how Pope Pius XI sold it in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* on the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, in 1931 (*Quadragesimo Anno* means “in the 40th year”). Pious endorsed corporatism or “syndicalism” because it was a way to “avoid the reefs of individualism and collectivism.” Corporatism, the Church argued, bound together all of the players in a web of social solidarity—social-ism.

In America, *Quadressimo Anno* hit like a thunderclap. Catholic social reformers embraced it as a blueprint for the needed reorganization of American life. Franklin Roosevelt hailed it as “one of the greatest documents of modern times” and read from it at length in speeches. Father John Ryan, one of the most important progressives of the 20th century, embraced
it as the blueprint for a nonviolent social revolution. Father Charles Coughlin, initially an even more zealous supporter of Roosevelt’s than Ryan before becoming a more radical critic of the New Deal, also believed that in Catholic corporatism lay the salvation of America and the world. Ryan and Coughlin hoped that the National Recovery Administration would fulfill the vision of a society where capital and labor worked in tandem toward “social justice.”

Coughlin and Ryan had good reason to believe that the New Deal was ushering in precisely the age they prayed for. Under the National Recovery Administration, industries were cartelized. The NRA was a boon to big business precisely because under corporatism, the “stakeholders” get to write rules that are good for the stakeholders. Small businesses that couldn’t afford to comply with the new codes under the Blue Eagle program and similar authorities found themselves crushed under the combined weight of the state and big business.

As Coughlin’s presence in this history implies, concepts of left-wing and right-wing are irrelevant in this context. The temptation or tendency to fall back into North’s “natural state” is universal. In some societies, proponents of corporatism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, technocracy, and the like may be seen as “change agents,” “socialists,” “revolutionaries,” “progressives,” or some other label we associate with the left. In others, they may be called or call themselves “conservatives,” “traditionalists,” “monarchists,” or “nationalists.” The language and emotional appeals change along with the team jerseys, but the underlying social arrangement they are advocating remains the same.

The major difference between the left and the right when it comes to any movement dedicated to overthrowing the free-market order—corporatist, authoritarian, etc.—is which groups will be the winners and which groups will be the losers. A left-wing system might empower labor leaders, government bureaucrats, progressive intellectuals, universities, certain minority groups, and one set of industries. A right-wing system might reward a different set of industries as well as traditional religious groups and their leaders, an ethnic majority, aristocrats, or perhaps rural interests. But both systems would be reactionary in the sense that they rejected the legacy of the Lockean revolution, preferring a Northian natural state where the “stakeholders” colluded to determine what was best for their interests.

Today, in America, we associate defense of the market with the political right, although the new nationalist fervor aroused by Donald Trump and his defenders may overturn that somewhat. Already, the president’s economic rhetoric—and considerable swaths of his policies—is more reminiscent of natural-state economics. Just as Obama picked economic winners and losers to the benefit of his coalition, Trump rewards industries that are crucial to his. One can argue that favoring wind and solar power is better policy than favoring steel and coal, but it’s still an argument for favoritism.

Since the birth of free-market economics, the team jerseys have changed many times. Under Napoleon, for instance, champions of the free market were denizens of the political left. Even today, what makes a libertarian in America a “right-winger” makes him a “liberal” in most of Europe.

“Critics and advocates of a capitalist, market economy are forever reinventing the wheel, repeating arguments made by their forebears decades and sometimes centuries ago,” writes Jerry Mueller in summarizing the thought of Albert O. Hirschman. But while the arguments repeat themselves endlessly, it’s often anyone’s guess where they will appear on the political spectrum at any given moment. Consider this generic critique of capitalism, paraphrased from Mueller:

The unceasing search for profit unsettles authentic forms of living. Civic engagement,
in politics and culture, is downgraded to a second-class concern that must always defer to economic efficiency. The citizen is no longer interested in shared sacrifice, preferring personal gain. As the machine of capitalism becomes more and more efficient, human beings are reduced to specialized automatons, motivated by instant gratification. To sustain this new orientation, capitalists market new products as needs instead of wants (ask a teenager whether she needs a cellphone or merely wants one). The workers are transformed into consumers who define themselves in terms of what they have. Even the family is not safe from the constant stoking of acquisitiveness, as advertising penetrates the home.

This critique, in one form or another, has been a staple of the left since the end of the Second World War. It can be found in the speeches of Ralph Nader, the writing of Naomi Klein, and across the whole range of writings from the Frankfurt School Marxists. It can be found in the policy programs of leading liberals such as Senator Elizabeth Warren, who recently proposed a sweeping corporatist set of reforms that would yoke any business with more than $1 billion in revenue to a social-justice agenda. Warren’s “Accountable Capitalism Act” would create a new federal corporate charter that would require guild-like requirements in private-sector hiring, firing, compensation, and “worker participation” in corporate decision-making.

Warren’s ACA has received rave reviews from the left, which sees it as a breathtakingly modern and advanced program. But it’s not. Two centuries before such ideas were considered cutting-edge left-wing, anti-globalist indictments of “the system,” they were cutting-edge right-wing indictments of “the system.”

Justus Möser, a jurist and social theorist living in the small German village of Osnabrück, was one of the first critics of globalization. He “saw the international market as pernicious for destroying the particular culture of Osnabrück,” Mueller writes. “It did so, first, by creating new needs that could not be fulfilled by the traditional economy of the region. Second, competition from commodities that could be produced more cheaply abroad was destroying the traditional guild-based modes of production, and the social and political structures with which they were intertwined.”

Möser was right about that last point; it is hard to desire what one does not know exists. Which is why he argued so assiduously that his fellow residents of Osnabrück should be protected from the market and its diabolical innovations. According to Möser, new products eroded the moral fiber of the community. They caused wives to demand more from their husbands. They created undue pressure on guilds and local tradesmen who had been making the same products the same way for generations. New fashions were inherently disruptive. “What would it help to have the best hat maker,” he asked, “if the French were to decide all of a sudden to wear hats made of oil cloth? How easily a new fashion robs the best craftsmanship of its fruits. And how far must a state sink if it does not anticipate [these developments] or does not change its craft?”

Möser also believed that “our ancestors did not tolerate these rural shopkeepers; they were spare in dispensing market freedoms; they banned the Jews from our diocese; why this severity? Certainly in order that the rural inhabitants not be daily stimulated, tempted, led astray and deceived. They stuck to the practical rule: that which one does not see will not lead one astray.”

And what were the destructive products that he felt he had to save the noble people of Osnabrück from? For starters, a relatively new product called coffee, which he believed led to moral decay. Also on his list of horribles: silk kerchiefs, linen from Flanders, leather gloves, wool stockings, metal buttons, mirrors, cotton caps, (better) knives, and needles.
Möser’s economic policies were not grounded in, or even primarily rationalized by, economic arguments. He was making a social argument. The established order was good, and economic change was bad because it corroded that order. We see the same thing all around us today (a perfect example: the controversy over Starbucks’s opening its first store in Italy last month). Obviously economists will argue about what contributes to net productivity growth and what policies lead to Pareto optimality, but as a political matter, the opposition to free trade in goods, services, and labor (i.e., immigration) has always drawn its emotional power from dismay over disruptions to the social order. This does not make these concerns any less legitimate. But it is useful to see these controversies for what they really are.

The generations of American workers who grew up in the coal or steel industry opposed laws that “changed their way of life” just as the luddites despised the new industrial mills because those infernal machines were unraveling the social fabric of 19th-century England. The Swedish economic historian Eli Heckscher concluded that, from 1686 to 1759, the effort to protect wool and linen manufacturers from foreign competition “cost the lives of some 16,000 people, partly through executions and partly through armed affrays, without reckoning the unknown but certainly much larger number…sent to the galleys…. On one occasion in Valence, seventy-seven were sentenced to be hanged, fifty-eight were to be broken on the wheel, 631 were sent to the galleys.”

To the extent that the labels “conservative” and “liberal” or “left” and “right” mean anything in this context, the difference stems from which authority the combatants cite. Möser looked to established tradition to legitimize his arguments. Marx (and those like him) looked instead to the future, to an idealized and utopian Shangri-la at the end of History. What unites both worldviews is that each is based on a fiction. Möser defended feudalism by resorting to wholly literary and folkloric tales of an imagined past. Marx invoked not just an imagined past, but more important, an imagined future. What ties these visions together is that they seek to impose one coalition of elite preferences on all of society.

Möser was right about at least one thing. The homogenizing nature of the market society could and did pave the way to tyrannies impossible under the old order. Universal laws, Möser argued, “depart from the true plan of nature, which reveals its wealth through its multiplicity, and would clear the path to despotism, which seeks to coerce all according to a few rules and so loses the richness that comes with variety.”

It’s a good point. Industrial capitalism is as much to blame for the consolidation and homogenization of nations as champions of progressive central planning are, if not more so. One need only study the history of railroads in the United States to see this. Local particularity is the enemy of CEOs and social engineers alike, which is why they so often work in tandem (think of the outrageous use of eminent domain to bulldoze neighborhoods in the interest of progress and a business’s expansion) even as they denounce each other. Möser is also right that this convergence of interests makes despotism all the easier. As America’s Founders well understood, a society enjoying a multiplicity of institutions, interests, and intact communities (i.e., factions) is much more difficult to subjugate by a single central power, be it a king, a dictator, or a bureaucracy.

But while the system Möser was defending may
have been a bulwark against centralized tyranny, it was also an apparatus for local tyranny. Möser was not defending local communities of free people, voluntarily choosing to live according to their own rules and customs. He was defending the feudal institution of serfdom, which allowed local lords to control the lives of their subjects. He believed serfs were better off under the protection of their lords, because the nobleman had a time-honored and tangible investment in their well-being. But history teaches us that the powerful often have an infinite capacity to rationalize their power over others as being “for their own good.”

Möser’s critiques were swamped by the simultaneous rise of nationalist movements and industrial capitalism. While the old guild system melted away, replaced by vastly freer, more efficient, and productive labor markets, the desire to live in a settled order only intensified.

Very few socialist thinkers have actually bothered to focus on the empirical case for socialism. Among the hundreds of thousands of pages written by Karl Marx, he dedicated a relative handful to how socialism itself would actually work. Georges Sorel (1847–1922), the French intellectual godfather of both Leninism and Italian Fascism, was also the foremost architect of syndicalism—an ill-defined variant of socialism that stressed violent direct action and was simultaneously elitist and anti-statist, in the words of Joshua Muravchik. Sorel recognized that the “science” in Marx’s work was almost worthless. But he believed that it was an incredibly useful tool for creating a “myth.”

Sorel, like Möser before him, recognized that the masses are moved by myths—shared understandings of meaning, destiny, and purpose. For Möser, it was the myth of his particular jewel of a community. Sorel, a man of the left, sought to create myths about the future. If the people could be not simply indoctrinated, but baptized, into a new revolutionary faith, their belief could achieve what Marx’s cold impersonal forces of history could not. As one of Sorel’s disciples, Benito Mussolini, put it: “It is faith that moves mountains, not reason. Reason is a tool, but it can never be the motive force of the crowd.” Sorel wanted to turn Marx’s writing into a religious force that bound men to a new proletarian crusade. As social science, Das Kapital was junk, but as scripture it was essential: “This apocalyptic text” Sorel wrote, was “created for the purpose of molding consciousness.”

And then there’s Hitler.

We can debate how much socialism there was in Hitler’s National Socialism. It is remarkable, however, that many of the people insisting that Norway or Sweden is obviously socialist even though they both are more free-market than Hitlerite Germany are aghast at the suggestion that the National Socialists were...socialists. Regardless, what is not debatable is that Hitler was one of the century’s foremost apostles of social-ism.

Hitler was obsessed with organic unity and his mystical, anti-rational conception of the volksgemeinschaft, or people’s community. He rejected “sterile” universal values and mechanical conceptions of the market that supposedly alienate man from his true self. “We have endeavored,” Hitler declared, “to depart from the external, the superficial, endeavored to forget social origin, class, profession, fortune, education, capital, and everything that separates men, in order to reach that which binds them together.”

The key concept for the Nazis in this regard was gleichschaltung. The term was borrowed from electrical engineering and roughly means coordination. The underlying concept was that all people and institutions should work in harmony toward a collective goal. At its core, gleichschaltung is no different from most other concepts of social solidarity, corporatism, social justice, and
the like. But the fact that it was derived from the world of technology shows how social-ism can be adapted to seem cutting-edge. The reactionary desire to defenestrate the liberal order and replace it with something more tribal doesn’t have to be sold in the language of feudalism or tradition. It can sound new and revolutionary (a point made at great length and to great effect by Friedrich Hayek in his writing on the perils of “scientism”).

That is precisely what the Brain Trusters of the New Deal did. In my book Liberal Fascism, I devote tens of thousands of words to showing how many of the New Dealers were inspired by the events in Russia and Italy in the 1920s. FDR himself conceded as much, albeit in private: “What we were doing in this country were some of the things that were being done in Russia and even some of the things that were being done under Hitler in Germany. But we were doing them in an orderly way.”

Stuart Chase, credited by some for coining the phrase “The New Deal,” was besotted with scientific-sounding arguments for remaking society. When he visited the Soviet Union in 1927, he marveled how the benevolent state was in the saddle, “informed by battalions of statistics” wielded by the new feudal lords of the Communist Party who needed “no further incentive than the burning zeal to create a new heaven and a new earth which flames in the breast of every good Communist.” This was in contrast to America, where “hungry stockholders” were making the economic decisions.

But even if you deny that the New Deal had any such family resemblances to regimes in Europe—and I know many do, and I understand very well why—that doesn’t affect the argument I am making here. Franklin Roosevelt’s social-ism was in the main homegrown and authentically American. But it was still an effort to impose a sense of community, of nationalistic belonging and meaning, on the society. The economic policies were secondary to that goal. “At the heart of the New Deal,” writes William Schambra, “was the resurrection of the national idea, the renewal of the vision of national community. Roosevelt sought to pull America together in the face of its divisions by an appeal to national duty, discipline, and brotherhood; he aimed to restore the sense of local community, at the national level.”

The sense of local community, the feeling of esprit de corps, the satisfaction one gets from belonging to a settled traditional or even tribal order, and the feeling of centeredness and place one gets in the family: These are all wonderful things. But they can, and often do, become poisonous, oppressive, and even tyrannical when the state tries to impose them on the entirety of society. When we try to make the macrocosm of society like the microcosm of the family or tribe, we destroy it every bit as much as when we try to make the microcosm operate according to the rules of the macrocosm.

The theoretical gobbledygook and philosophical argle-bargle change from place to place, era to era, but what holds constant is this passionate conviction or feeling that social solidarity, tribal togetherness, must not only triumph, but be imposed from above. The cultural references that prompt us to ask the social question change from age to age, but the answer remains the same: The system that breaks up society into individuals by letting them compete freely in a rule-bound marketplace creates a chasm that must be refilled, primarily by the state. This is what binds social-ism and socialism, and why both must be resisted.
IN FEBRUARY 1861, Abraham Lincoln left his home in Illinois and embarked on the journey to his inauguration. He faced, Lincoln publicly mused, a challenge greater than the one that had faced George Washington. Several states had already seceded; others, including Virginia, would soon follow. To Lincoln fell the extraordinary task of not only saving the Union, but also of making the case to the country that the Union was worth saving. This he did in a series of extraordinary remarks along the way to Washington. Standing in Trenton, addressing the New Jersey state legislature, Lincoln recalled Washington's own heroic struggles in that very city and how powerfully his reading about the Revolution had impacted him in his youth:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the
We must ask whether the version of nationalism that Hazony puts forward reflects the richness of Lincoln’s understanding not only of America—but of biblical Israel as well.

liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

In this remarkable reflection, Lincoln coins a fascinating phrase. America, he argues, is an “almost chosen people.” Lincoln seems to suggest that the original chosen nation, biblical Israel, was formed not merely for a national existence, but for something higher and greater, so that all families of the world would be blessed. America’s story is parallel to, and an imitation of, Israel’s. The story of the birth of the American founding is about more than “national independence”; it is about an “original idea” of liberty and equality, one that holds out “a great promise” for all the world. This imitation of Israel, for Lincoln, is the heart of American exceptionalism.

At the same time, Lincoln stresses, America is not chosen, but “almost chosen.” Unlike European nations that saw themselves as superseding the Jewish people, America imitates Israel but does not replace it. Moreover, whereas Israel, for the biblical promise, will be redeemed by God no matter how much it strays, an “almost chosen” nation must remain loyal to the ideas that make it exception, or it will cease to exist.

Lincoln’s words in Trenton remind us that one cannot understand America without studying biblical Israel and the way that the Bible viewed nationhood. It is with this in mind that we consider Yoram Hazony’s new book, The Virtue of Nationalism. Hazony deserves enormous credit for his philosophical mission of placing the Bible at the center of political thought, and his latest work has been celebrated by many as a worthy expression of the nationalistic moment in which America, and much of the world, finds itself.

At the same time, we must ask whether the version of nationalism that he puts forward reflects the richness of Lincoln’s understanding not only of America—but of biblical Israel as well.

In The Virtue of Nationalism, Hazony contrasts two political philosophies, nationalism and imperialism. In his reckoning, nationalism “regards the world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions and pursuing their own interests without interference.” This, he says, “is opposed to imperialism, which seeks to bring peace and prosperity to the world by uniting mankind, as much as possible, under a single political regime.”

Who are the imperialists to whom he refers? First and foremost, those leaders of postwar Europe who dreamed of a union in which European identity overrode that of unique nations—the ultimate anti-nationalist endeavor. Yet the term also encompasses enthusiasts for empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus the book would place Benjamin Disraeli and European Union President Jean Claude Juncker in the same category, not to mention Churchill.

Yet it is not only EU enthusiasts and Victorians who are the target of Hazony’s opprobrium. The heart of imperialism, he suggests, is the desire to advance a single truth among differentiated nations. He singles out the late Charles Krauthammer and his fellow neoconservatives as targets for critique. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Krauthammer diagnosed our age as a “Unipolar Moment” in which American power could best be utilized for the furtherance of American ideals. This, Hazony writes, is “consciously part of an imperialist political tradition.”

It may seem strange to count Krauthammer as an imperialist, as he himself stressed many times that America is unique among historic superpowers in its disinterest in acquiring new lands. Hazony notes this in a footnote and responds by asserting that imperialism does not express a desire for territory; rather, it is “the expression of a hunger to control other nations,” which he believes Krauthammer’s thesis expresses.

What is the problem with utilizing power to exert an influence on other nations? For Hazony, it violates the political wisdom of the Bible, which, he insists, was embraced by the best of Protestant political thought. This biblical nationalism, he says, is founded on two theses:

*Moral minimum required for legitimate government*. First, the king or ruler, in order to rule by right, had to devote himself to the protection of his people in their life, family,
and property, to justice in the courts, to the maintenance of the Shabbat, and to the public recognition of the one God.

Right of national self-determination. Second, nations that were cohesive and strong enough to secure their political independence would henceforth be regarded as possessing what later came to be called a right of self-determination...while it was accepted that there exist natural minimal requirements for maintaining a civilized society, and that, in line with the first principle, these were binding upon all governments, it was not expected that all nations would become as one in their thoughts, laws, or ways of life.

Hazony further argues that this approach stands in stark contrast to the internationalism of the last three decades, whose champions “would have a single regime of law and a single economic system, governed by Americans and Europeans in accordance with liberal political doctrines. And when a nation ‘broke the rules’ of this new world order, as was the case in Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, the American military, with allied European contingents, was going to go in and reestablish these rules.”

One can certainly criticize the wisdom or prudence of the military operations in these countries, but it is not clear why they constitute imperialism as Hazony defines it. Did Iraq, Libya, and Serbia maintain the “moral minimum required for legitimate government”? If so, then the biblical moral minimum is minimal indeed.

LET US ASK: Does the story of biblical Israel teach us that the independence of nations is an inherent good?

The best theological response to this query is a paraphrase of Reverend Lovejoy from The Simpsons: “Short answer, ‘yes’ with an ‘if’; long answer, ‘no’ with a ‘but.’” As Hazony argues, the nation Israel was indeed born in the overthrow of a mighty, immoral, tyrannical empire. The nation did ultimately establish a state in its land and largely eschewed the allure of empire. While it preached an eschatological vision, in which all nations recognize the God of Israel, it did so without assuming the assimilation of these nations into Israel, with each people instead forming its own unique covenant with God. The biblical vision certainly can be contrasted with that of John Lennon’s “Imagine,” which yearns for a world in which there are “no countries,” as the sole solution for peace on earth. There is no question that the most utopian proponents of European assimilation propound a perspective in tension with the biblical approach.

At the same time, Israel’s founding was noticeably different from the origins of other nations. Indeed, its very origins are meant to remind us that its liberty as a nation was and is not an independent end, but a means to a covenantal calling. Moreover, Israel existed and exists not only for itself but for the unfolding of God’s plan on earth, so that all the families of the earth will be blessed.

The theologian Michael Wyschogrod noted that while the Jewish people are a nation, their nationhood is not formed within the boundaries of its land. Israel, according to the Bible, came into being at Sinai before entering the Holy Land. “Nowhere else in the memory of peoples is entry into the land remembered,” Wyschogrod writes. In all other cases, “a people is born out of a soil which is its mother. The people does not pre-date the land.” Israel becomes a nation through the covenant at Sinai; or rather, the Israelites’ union to one another takes place only through its pledging a loyalty to the God of Israel and to His Torah. All this is meant to remind Israel that once it enters the land, and takes on the trappings of a standard polity, it still has a calling higher than the state itself.

It is with this in mind that we should consider Hazony’s biblically based argument. He suggests that the Hebrew Bible proposes an array of independent nation states as the best political arrangement, in that it avoids both the anarchy of tribalism and the tyranny of imperialism. For the Bible, he argues, a free state is founded when leaders of tribes “participate in the selection of the ruler of the nation and sit in his councils when important decisions are to be made. The loyalty of the individual is thus given to the state out of loyalty to his parents, his tribe, and his nation.” The most famous case of such a unification of tribes, he
continues, “is that of ancient Israel, which has served as the model of a national state.”

The problem is that this is not quite how Israel comes into being. The Israelites become a nation at Sinai, and through the re-acceptance of the covenant with Moses on the banks of the Jordan. The leaders of the tribes do not participate in the selection of their leader, because Moses is God’s elected, as is his successor Joshua. When the Israelite tribes are united under kings, both Saul and David are anointed not by the people but by God, and those who suggest that another leader might be a better choice are considered not only traitors but heretics, deniers of God’s election. Biblical Israel is a nation, but it is constantly reminded that the nation exists for the covenant, or brit, not the other way around.

Thus Moses, in his valedictory, praises the Levites, who punished the worshippers of the golden calf, for placing loyalty to the covenant above what Hazony calls loyalty to parents, tribe, and nation: “Who said of his father, and of his mother: ‘I have not seen him’; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew he his own children; for they have observed Thy word, and keep Thy covenant.”

Thus, there are key moments in the biblical narrative where the apparent Biblical preference for nationalism is totally overridden for covenantal purposes. Israel’s monarchy is split into two as punishment for Solomon’s failure to fully comply with the Torah. Jeremiah orders Zedekiah to show faith in God by surrendering to Babylonia, which the king fails to do—whereupon he and the people are punished for their insistence on national independence. Most striking, the Almighty embraces the empire of Persia under Cyrus, proclaiming him God’s anointed, or messiah, for his role in returning Israel to its land to restore its covenant under Ezra: “Thus saith the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him...For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen, I have called thee by thy name.”

If there is a central political message for Israel throughout the Bible, it is this: For Israel to deserve independence, it must remember that it exists for a calling more important than independence itself. Israel’s story is thus not easy to compare to that of other nations. Making a noteworthy biblical reference, Hazony argues that freedom can be experienced not only individually but also collectively, that national independence can serve as a foundation for human flourishing: “Is it really possible to speak of the freedom of a nation? To be sure, Israel is said to have rejoiced in its escape from the bondage of Egypt at the Red Sea, and it is this kind of freedom of the nation from empire that is celebrated every year on independence days in Czechia, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Serbia, South Korea, Switzerland, the United States, and many other countries.”

Again, this is not quite accurate. What is so striking about the song the former Egyptian slaves sing on the shore of the Sea of Reeds is that there is very little celebration of “freedom of the nation from empire.” What Israel celebrates is God, who has made His power manifest to the world: “I will sing unto the LORD, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation; this is my God, and I will glorify Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him.” The Hebrews sing of the exodus not as a national liberation but in the collective voice of a nation that now owes everything to God, a nation that has a destiny far beyond liberation itself.

One doubts, therefore, that Switzerland, or Greece, celebrates its independence today the way Israel did at the sea. America, however, does celebrate in this way, or at least it once did. In 1776, a committee made up of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams recommended to the Continental Congress that the seal of the nascent nation should feature Moses and Pharaoh at the Sea of Reeds. The motto they suggested as an accompaniment to this image referenced not the colonists’ liberation but something much higher and more universal: Rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God. There have been many nationalist movements in the history of the world; yet only America, in its own extraordinary moments, has seen itself as “almost chosen.”

Yet still a question remains. The covenant of the people of Israel is the Torah, which forms them as a nation at Sinai, and again on the banks of the Jordan. What is the covenantal document of Lincoln’s “almost chosen people”?
The villain in Hazony's book is John Locke. For Hazony, Locke's enlightenment theories spawned Rousseau and Kant, who are to blame for European anti-nationalism. And for Hazony, to the extent that America and England achieved greatness, it was because these nations learned from philosophers other than Locke.

What could be so egregiously problematic about this important 17th-century thinker? In propounding the theory of the social contract, Hazony writes, Locke helps bring into being a state that “is the product of consent alone: Individuals feel that their life and property are insufficiently secure, so they choose to form a pact to defend those interests.” Locke's focus is on individual liberty. His Second Treatise on Government has little to say about the bonds of family, tribe, and nation. In real life, however, “nations are communities bound together by bonds of mutual loyalty, carrying forward particular traditions from one generation to the next.”

Did not Locke have an enormous impact on America? Did not his theory of individual freedom and the origin of government fundamentally influence our country's understanding of itself? For Hazony, the answer seems to be no. In an interesting exchange in Mosaic, Peter Berkowitz stresses the importance of Locke's theory of liberty to America, noting that we owe to Locke “our notions about the proper limits of government power and the effective means for restraining it—questions central to the modern tradition of freedom.” Hazony responded by denying the philosopher's impact on the Anglo-American political tradition and ultimately on the United States: “It was not Lockean radicals but English nationalists and common lawyers led by Edward Coke and John Selden, the true political conservatives of early-17th-century England, who heroically stood against the Stuart theory of divine right…. It was the freedoms defended by these men that were then instated by their students in the English Bill of Rights of 1689, which in turn gave birth to the American Constitution and Bill of Rights. None of these documents makes mention of Lockean universal-rights theories (though the American Declaration of Independence does).”

The truth, however, is that the Declaration of Independence does more than “mention” a Lockean universal-rights theory; it locates that theory at the heart of the American idea. As Hazony implicitly acknowledges, the notion that all men are created equal, endowed with inalienable rights, is taken directly from the opening of Locke's Second Treatise. There was no question about this at the time, or indeed at any time since. Richard Henry Lee, who introduced the resolution for American independence in the Continental Congress, insisted that the Declaration's central theses had been “copied from Locke's treatise on government.” Later, Jefferson's Federalist enemies insisted that Jefferson “stole from Locke's essays.” Jefferson himself conceded that he wrote the document “neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment,” but rather as an “expression of the American mind,” drawing on the most important political thinkers, including Locke.

This does not mean that Locke alone influenced the Declaration. Hazony is right to note all that Locke's theory lacks, but the Founders remedied what was lacking in Locke by adding biblical concepts to the Declaration. Jefferson delivered a draft of the Declaration that made little reference to Hebraic ideas. It was other members of the Continental Congress who joined them with biblical ones. Their revisions ensured that the individual rights Jefferson had placed at the center of the American experiment were not only endowed by our Creator but would function only under His aegis: “We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, [appeal] to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions.” Whereupon the signers then bound themselves together in covenant under God: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Language like this helped turn the Declaration into what the late historian Pauline Meier has called “American scripture.” As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has argued, America is unique because it joins Lockean social-contract theory and biblical covenantal concepts, which allows for both a language of individual freedom and collective national purpose. The covenantal conception of the United States, Sacks suggests, allows for “integration without assimilation,” both individual freedom and collective destiny. The
American polity was profoundly influenced by Locke while transcending the more problematic aspects of his Second Treatise.

What is the brit, the covenant of America, that marks its higher calling? For Lincoln, it could only be the Declaration of Independence. One day after his speech in Trenton, he arrived in Philadelphia and made reference to Independence Hall, where the Declaration was approved, as nothing less than the Jerusalem of America: “I have never asked anything that does not breathe from those walls. All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall. May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if ever I prove false to those teachings.”

America does not date its founding to the ratification of the Constitution, but to the adoption of the Declaration, not only as its creed but as its covenant. It was on that day, not during the Constitutional convention, that for Lincoln, “our fathers brought forth a great nation.” It is the Declaration, more than any other document, that defines who we are. If aspects of America’s constitutional structure were altered, we would remain America—and, of course, its Constitution has been altered 17 times since its original passage. Yet if Congress voted unanimously to affirm that all men are not created equal, that they are not endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, and that government does not exist by virtue of the consent of the governed, then American would no longer exist. The flag might still have stars and stripes, the country’s borders might still stretch from sea to shining sea, it might still have a president, a Congress, and a judiciary, but it would not be the country founded on July 4, 1776.

There is no America without Locke, but America is not a merely Lockean people. The DNA of the American polity is a double helix consisting of political Hebraism and Locke. There are, at times, tensions between these two, between Hebraism and the Enlightenment; but nevertheless it is the Declaration that defines who we are. It is because of this covenantal-Lockean document that we are a creedal nation.

Yet Hazony seems to challenge the inherently creedal character of America, bemoaning how a “love of the founding documents (or the ‘American creed’ that they supposedly contain) is now frequently invoked as a substitute for an attachment to the American nation itself.” Reversion for the central documents of the United States, he argues, must be founded on love of one’s people. Hazony cites the reverence that the Jewish community shows the Torah scroll in synagogue when it is lifted up above the heads of all worshippers:

I sensed this veneration in the way the adults stepped forward to kiss the scroll when it was brought out....I knew that if the tora were ever dropped to the floor, the congregation would fast for a month in penance....In these and many other ways, I experienced the reverence of the clan—for the congregation has long been, among Jews and Christians, the equivalent of the clan—as my own. This is to say that reverence for the tora and loyalty to it [are] learned by children as an inseparable aspect of their loyalty to their family and clan, who themselves display their veneration for the tora as an inseparable aspect of their loyalty to the Jewish nation.

This is only partially true. The reading of the Torah is, for Jewish law, a re-creation of Sinai, of Israel’s covenantal founding. The lifting of the Torah above the community emphasizes exactly this point. For Jews, loyalty to the Torah is above loyalty to the community, and when the two come into conflict, the former supersedes the latter, just as when loyalty to the Torah comes into conflict with familial bonds, the former supersedes the latter. Observant Jewish parents do indeed teach their children to revere the Torah, and children do indeed originally imbibe this reverence out of reverence for their parents. But it is our hope that our children will come to understand that it is ultimately the Torah, not us, to which their most profound loyalty must adhere—and that their dedication to the Jewish nation should ultimately be an extension of their dedication to the Torah, not the reverse. If they do not come to revere Torah more than they revere us, we will have failed, both as parents and as Jews.

In a similar sense, for America, attachment to country and countrymen can indeed teach one to revere the sources of the founding. But ultimately we are...
American nationalism is inseparable from the belief that the Declaration is the covenantal heart of America and that it contains a truth that is not for America alone.

called to learn that the American idea must be revered more than national self-interest, and that ultimately our loyalty to one another as Americans should be founded on loyalty to America’s founding ideas, not the other way around. This, too, Lincoln himself reflected, standing next to Independence Hall:

I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. This is a sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world, if I can help to save it. If it cannot be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it.

These are eerie and prophetic words from a man who would do so much to reify the Declaration’s principles in America, and who would become the first president to be assassinated precisely because of his defense of these principles. Yet what Lincoln stresses is this: His desire for American unity stems from his loyalty to the Declaration, not the reverse. Whatever American nationalism might be, for Lincoln, it is inseparable from the belief that the Declaration is the covenantal heart of America and that it contains a truth that is not for America alone. Hazony contends that in “the eyes of liberal imperialists, every dissent looks the same,” whereas nationalists “do not and never will possess a single worldview that they seek to advance. They share no universal doctrine that they offer for the salvation of all mankind.” But if Hazony is right, and nationalists “share no universal doctrine that they offer for the salvation of all mankind,” then the greatest of all Americans cannot be considered a nationalist. For it was Abraham Lincoln who explained why the author of the Declaration of Independence, for all his faults, was so central to America’s self-understanding: “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”

Yet it would be absurd to say that the man who saved the Union was no nationalist. And rightly understood, Americans are a nationalistic people. The key here is understanding this correctly. Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru have persuasively argued that the time is ripe to push back on a purely liberal and internationalist understanding, and to embrace all that American nationalism might include:

It includes loyalty to one’s country: a sense of belonging, allegiance, and gratitude to it. And this sense attaches to the country’s people and culture, not just to its political institutions and laws. Such nationalism includes solidarity with one’s countrymen, whose welfare comes before, albeit not to the complete exclusion of, that of foreigners. When this nationalism finds political expression, it supports a federal government that is jealous of its sovereignty, forthright and unapologetic about advancing its people’s interests, and mindful of the need for national cohesion.

Even so, America remains a creedal and exceptional nation in a world that still needs American leadership. And America’s biblically based understanding of its story, and of its role in the world, means that its covenantal ideals of liberty and equality impose on us at times a higher calling than mere self-interest. One can certainly be wary of entanglements overseas while still asserting that American power can, and at times should, be wielded to advance the principles of the
The political period in which we find ourselves is a fascinating one. But we should not—we must not—embrace a version of nationalism that defines America, and biblical Israel, down.

American idea, which America considers a calling that extends beyond national self-interest itself.

The political period in which we find ourselves is a fascinating one. This can indeed be a healthy moment for the embrace, not only of patriotism but also of nationalism, and it can as well be a moment in which we return to the Hebrew Bible in conceiving of what nationalism should be. But it should not—it must not—embrace a version of nationalism that defines America, and biblical Israel, down. Hazony muses that in an age shorn of tradition, we require “an alliance of Old Testament–conscious Protestants and nationalist Catholics and Jews” to rediscover the Hebraic political vision of the West and restore it “as the basis for a new era.” I could not agree more. But this vision must include an understanding of the covenantal callings of the “almost chosen people” who, inspired by the chosen people, believed that they came into being for “something even more than National Independence”—for “something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.”

In this time of national fragmentation and fevered debate, it is this vision—Lincoln’s vision—that, please God, may help us “achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”
How the Radicals Became the Technocrats

The true legacy of 1968

By Sohrab Ahmari

HALF A CENTURY since the mayhem of the Democratic National Convention; since barricades were raised and tires set aflame and paving stones hurled in the Latin Quarter of Paris; since the formation at the Sorbonne of the comité d’action pédérastique révolutionnaire and the only slightly more decent front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire . . .

since Bill Ayers abandoned early-childhood education for terror; since “the youth” took to throwing the epithet “fascist” at their elders, many of whom had fought the real thing; since Stokely Carmichael and Michael Harrington and Tom Hayden and Herbert Marcuse and Huey Newton rode high . . .

Half a century later, the long drama of 1968 is finally drawing to a close.

The 68ers haven’t disappeared, of course. Medical advances in the West mean that plenty are still kicking. Some were only 12 years old when they first tore the stars and stripes in protest against America’s wars in Asia—too young to access matches but old enough to appreciate the potency of gesture politics. Others, like the Communist politician Angela Davis, have been embraced by a new generation of activists seeking to bathe hashtag politics in the old radical’s sepia-toned aura of danger.

Yet as future French President François Mitterrand told student leaders at the time: “Being young doesn’t last very long. You spend a lot more time being old.” Today, 68ers are law partners, columnists, marketing directors and financiers, state ministers, and so on. And they teach. Nearly a fifth of 1960s American radicals were toiling in academe decades after the fact, according to one 1989 study. Pensions, home care, and the disposition of estates loom large for these erstwhile street fighters.

More important, the cultural and political clock is ticking. Though they imagine themselves forever

Sohrab Ahmari is senior writer at Commentary. His spiritual memoir is forthcoming from Ignatius Press.

* I am indebted for this delicious detail, and many others throughout the essay, to Richard Vinen’s insightful new chronicle, 1968: Radical Protest and Its Enemies (Harper, 2018).
locked in combat with authority, the 68ers have, in fact, wielded authority over Western culture for half a century. In that time, everything from advertising to family and sexual life to school discipline to even Christian theology has reflected 68er impulses, which have hardened into institutional orthodoxies.

The orthodoxies were, paradoxically, anti-tradition and anti-authority. But in practice, the 68ers were far more ruthless than the supposedly “authoritarian” generations they overthrew. One need only look to the transformation of the university during their reign to see that they viewed academe not as a refuge from conformity, but as the space where they could most fully enforce their own brand of conformity. The 68ers knew how to discipline and punish: not with tear gas and the cane, but with the administrative hearing and the speech code.

Now barbarians amass at the ramparts of the empire and barge in with alarming frequency. Voters across the West demand civilizational barriers. Particularism is back. Among the religious faithful, denominations and orders that dedicated themselves to projects of liberation are decaying, while the traditionalist and orthodox flourish. Students raised in secular milieus are attending religious services at the behest of Jordan Peterson, a psychologist who fiercely rejects sexual liberationism and talks a lot about order. Populist politicians wave rosaries at rallies.

If the opposition were limited to ballot-box uprisings and the religious sphere, the 68ers could perhaps cope. They were always suspicious of democratic majorities and the Church (notwithstanding the entreaties of those many leftish priests and monks, who, at the height of 1968, founded utopian communes and drafted speeches for Fidel Castro). But the rebellion has extended to the 68ers’ own roost—on the left.

While the New New Left culturally appropriates the icons of the Old New Left for branding purposes, it is, in fact, deeply restrictionist, even puritanical. It, too, seeks to erect barriers in its way, especially in matters sexual. #MeToo, for example, is decidedly not a 68er movement. If the wildest 68ers hadn’t succumbed to the wages of their wildness, they would be brought up on #MeToo charges, convicted, and sentenced in the online court of New New Left opinion—all in a matter of hours.

Worst of all for a movement that was obsessed with “owning its own story,” the eclipse of the 68ers means that the generation no longer exercises full control over the narrative of “1968.” The drama is open to interpretation to a degree that was unimaginable in preceding decades. Half a century later, we can render a verdict on 1968 without some aging and cranky radical, now ensconced in the dean’s office or the C-suite, breathing down our necks.

Any such assessment must grapple, foremost, with the following question: How did a movement that declared war on liberal affluence and technocracy, things it identified with fascism and even Nazism, come to be so thoroughly coopted by technocracy and affluence? Put another way, what was behind the dialectic of self-negation that saw the 68ers go from throwing stones (or, at least, praising stone-throwers) to occupying the glass towers of the affluent society?

That such a dialectic is at work in the 1968 experience is beyond doubt. I have already mentioned the campus. After 1968, it became de rigueur in the soft disciplines to master certain catechetical formulas of the cultural left. The university adapted itself to the 68ers, and they in turn buffeted the university with their anti-authority authority and anti-dogmatic dogma. Through it all, the university has remained a training ground for the technocratic elite. Only, it now produces more Sarah Jeongs than it does Robert McNamaras—more tech-savvy identitarians than weapons-hurling establishmentarians. The substance has shifted; the forms and instrumental functions have not.

Other examples are legion. Take the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, the Maoist filmmaker closely identified with 1968. Godard’s pioneering cut-and-paste techniques, mismatched music cues, and ironical subversion of Hollywood genre conventions were all meant to lay bare and ultimately dismantle the ideological structures supposedly undergirding cinema itself. Yet it was Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Madison Avenue that had the last laugh. Today Godardian techniques and mashups are old hat in advertising and YouTube videos.

The most instructive case studies come from the lives of leading 68ers. It would have caused heads to explode among his peers in the German radical movements to learn that their comrade Joschka Fischer would eventually serve as their nation’s foreign minister in the late ’90s and early aughts. And more, that he

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would emerge as the pudgy, amiable face of a muscular liberal internationalism that championed the use of force to right humanitarian wrongs.

That would be the same Fischer who, in 1969, attended a secret meeting in Algeria of the Palestine Liberation Organization, at which the PLO pledged to destroy the Jewish state. The same Fischer who, in 1973, was caught on camera viciously beating a police officer. The same Fischer who was jailed for his participation at another rally, in 1976, at which protesters threw a Molotov cocktail that burned an officer nearly to death.

In 2001, Germans greeted these revelations about their foreign minister with remarkable calm and good humor. As Paul Berman notes in his 2005 book, *Power and the Idealists*, the exposure of the cop-beating photos didn’t force Fischer’s resignation. Rather, they impelled numerous respectable Germans to say, in effect: *Who among us didn’t beat up police officers in those days?* Fischer, then, represented a generational norm among the activists, not an aberration. Beat and nearly kill two working-class men in the name of the proletariat, then go on to success in government, media, and the learned professions.

The case of French student activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit was more shocking still. In the aftermath of May 1968, when he became the closest thing the global student movement had to a spokesman, “Danny the Red” resolved to remake Western education, starting with kindergarten. His big idea was to inoculate children against the habits of obedience and traditionalism, which were baked into Western family and sexual life and which he believed had created the conditions for Nazism and fascism in the first half of the 20th century.

By Cohn-Bendit’s own telling, anti-authoritarian education involved some unusual interactions between adults and kindergarteners. “It happened to me several times that certain kids opened my fly and began to stroke me,” he recounted in a memoir published in 1975 (some translations have this as “tickle me”). “I reacted differently according to circumstances, but their desire posed a problem to me. I asked them: Why don’t you play together? Why have you chosen me, and not the other kids?” But if they insisted, I caressed them even so.”

When the memoir re-emerged several years later, amid the Fischer affair, Cohn-Bendit vigorously denied accusations of pedophilia. The paragraph in question had been a “literary exaggeration,” he argued, intended to provoke and question bourgeois sexual mores. Then there was a television interview from 1982, in which Cohn-Bendit spoke of playing an “incredibly erotic game” with a five-year-old girl. That remark, too, was mere provocation, Cohn-Bendit and his defenders insisted. *You uptight, middle-class Europeans would expect me, the militant 68er, to say something like that. That was the joke.*

Or…something. After his colorful stint in early-childhood education, Cohn-Bendit shifted to the center, much as his friend and comrade Fischer had done. He went on to serve for a decade, from 2004 to 2014, as a member of the European Parliament. By then he was very much the conventional European green-liberal: for legalization of cannabis, for same-sex marriage, for “children’s rights” (*caveat emptor*), for ever-deeper European integration, and, of course, against “traditionalists.”

Somehow the forces of affluence and technocracy were able to turn most of these men and women—Fischer, Cohn-Bendit, and their comrades on both sides of the Atlantic—into spokesmen and operatives for a certain kind of, well, affluent technocracy. Neither Fischer’s radical cop-beatings nor Cohn-Bendit’s radical kiddie-play (whether it was real or a case of *épater les bourgeois*) was too much for the “system” to swallow.

In an interview published in May in the *New York Review of Books*, Cohn-Bendit raged against the French right’s image of him: “Whenever an immigrant misbehaves, it’s Cohn-Bendit’s fault. Cohn-Bendit told people to stop obeying and start destroying it all—the schools, the family, marriage, the Church.” But Cohn-Bendit did urge people to stop obeying and to start destroying the pillars of tradition. And it was . . . fine. He seamlessly morphed from Danny the Red into Danny the Mandarin, who did some wild things once, whose antics maybe pushed Western liberalism to liberalize a little faster than it might have otherwise.

How typical, Danny the Red would have said, and how boring.

Critics and historians of 1968 have offered several accounts of this passage. One explanation is that the transformation of the...
68ers attests to the elasticity, and durability, of affluent technocracy. For all the chaos of 1968, Western liberal democracies managed to absorb and turn into so much kitsch youth energies that would fall other systems—Iran’s monarchy, Soviet Communism—within a decade or two.

A simpler explanation is that young idealists and ideologues grew up and learned the real ways of the world. They learned to compromise, set their sights on what was possible, chill out a bit. But this is superficial nonsense. The history of 1968—both the year and the broader cultural moment—is the story of the older generation compromising with all but the most violent and radical of the young people, not the other way around.

The parents of 68ers “did not necessarily share the particular views of their children,” notes Richard Viven in his book 1968. “However, parents supported their children’s right to protest even when they disagreed with the way they exercised that right.” Maybe the kids go a little too far, but their hearts are in the right place.

Taking a longer view, moreover, it is worth asking: Which if any of the cultural desires expressed in 1968 has gone unmet by the affluent society in the years and decades since? Which of the 1968 appetites for sexual liberation—save for pederasty and man-boy love, which existed at the margins of some of the radical groups—have gone unsated? Which restrictions remain? And which were already on the way to being abolished even before 1968?

As for the Marxist economic demands, the truth is that these were never as serious as the slogans suggested. In his history of the 68er rise to power, Berman points out that there were, in fact, three strands of Marxist thinking among them. There was a retro-Marxism that more or less sought to revive the 1930s, with its anti-fascist United Fronts; a “modern Marxism” that looked with admiration to various murderous mass movements in the Third World “mixed with a few doctrines of the Frankfurt School”; and, finally, a culturally anarchistic or libertarian Marxism that “spoke about freedom and personal autonomy and, at the same time, nodded respectfully at Che Guevara... an anarchist salt and a Marxist pepper shake together”

It was the third strand—the autonomy-maximizing strand that equated all tradition, hierarchy, authority, moral order, and continuity with fascism—that ultimately won out and came to shape elite Western culture post-1968. Its political and cultural logic led to the kaleidoscopic multiculturalism, liberal fundamentalism, and doctrinaire transnationalism that are beginning to unravel today. And that libertarian strand couldn’t have dominated the culture for half a century if its energies were not already in sync with the liberalizing, autonomy-maximizing thrust of the affluent technocracy. Hence, the pre-1968 elders shook their heads in dismay at the radicalism and uncouthness of the rebels—then opened the gates to them.

The best that could be said for them is that the 68ers discovered a real void at the heart of Western modernity. That was the judgment of the Italian Catholic philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989).

Which if any of the cultural desires expressed in 1968 has gone unmet by the affluent society in the years and decades since?

Hardly a fan of student radicalism, Del Noce nevertheless granted much to the students. The world the 68ers were born into, he agreed, was a spiritual desert. The universities were intellectually impoverished places, where students went in search of answers to the deep moral questions and came out with heads stuffed full of disjointed, technical knowledge. And beyond the campus, they encountered a world that shoehorned all human existence into two activities, namely technical mastery over nature and accumulation.

It was a world shorn of natural law, religion, metaphysics, permanent and absolute values—the classical and Judeo-Christian legacy of the West, in short. The 68ers thirsted for more, and, Del Noce argued, rightly so. The students, he wrote, “do not want to belong to the system as instruments, which incidentally would be unavoidable because the society of well-being knows only instruments. And they are perfectly right to reaffirm their humanity” against the totalizing claims of technocracy and well-being.

Only, under the bad guidance of their neo-Marxist gurus, the 68ers misunderstood the source of their problem. Marcuse and the like took it as “an axiom that the metaphysical and theological negations” of 19th-century materialism “can no longer be called into question.” Their students went along and

* See his The Age of Secularisation, recently translated into English by Carlo Lancellotti (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017).
therefore ended up absorbing the same materialist assumptions that had spiritually deracinated the West in the first place. This was the great tragedy of 1968. 

Religion, tradition, and permanent values were thus out the window—indeed, these things were seen as expressions of authoritarianism and impediments to freedom. But so was revolutionary Marxism, which had already, by 1968, discredited itself. So what was the way forward for students who sought after a more meaningful life than technocracy afforded them? The answer they settled on, under the gurus' influence, was to liberate the sexual appetites, to wage war even more ruthlessly against tradition.

Del Noce wrote: “The so-called ‘global’ rebellion becomes an absurd revolt against what exists. It becomes a form of ahistorical activism that cannot distinguish what is positive and what is negative in existing reality.” And further: “After the negation of every possible authority of values, all that is left is pure total negativism.” Pure nihilism, in other words.

Del Noce was writing in the moment, so he wasn’t in a position to see the ultimate outcome. But we can do that now. It turned out that the affluent, technocratic society was perfectly happy to accommodate—and, indeed, to commodify—sexual libertinism and nihilism and the further erosion of permanent values among Western publics. Hence why the libertarian-anarchic strand won out among 68ers. And hence how Danny the Red became Danny the libertine educator and, later, Danny the green-liberal member of the European Parliament.

For half a century, the West has suffered the consequences of this “absurd revolt,” this “pure total negativism,” which the 68ers enshrined in the institutions they stormed and occupied. Having utterly misunderstood the West and its dilemmas, they have tried to transmit their misunderstandings down the generations. In this, they have at least partially succeeded, judging by our contemporary cultural confusions.

But for the first time in a long time, the West is no longer trembling (exclusively) with 1968 anxieties, no longer mouthing 1968’s stock slogans or proposing its stock solutions in response to every problem, no longer dreaming (exclusively) 1968 dreams. On left and right, and especially among religious believers, we are discovering that barriers have their place, that openness shouldn’t be made a fetish of, even that modernity is not, in itself, a value.

We have our own anxieties and problems, to be sure, and these are in many ways darker than those faced by the 68ers. We have our own stock slogans and solutions, too. But at least our anxieties and slogans and dreams aren’t (exclusively) hand-me-downs from one especially petulant and irresponsible generation. This is progress.
From White Supremacy to Identity Politics

The injustice of America’s newest racial order

By Eli Steele

When I heard the words “you are white,” it startled me. I had heard far worse in my life, including racial epithets, but none with quite the sting carried by those three short, successive sounds. I struggled for a response, something to gain the upper hand, but I could only think: Had we really come to this point in America? Was I merely the color of my skin?

The year was 2014 and we were sitting at one of the communal tables at the White Privilege Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, where I had settled after a day of filming. It was late in the afternoon and the light coming off the frozen Lake Menona was turning blue. One of the four conference attendees at the table, a professor, gestured to my camera gear and asked me what my documentary was about. I told him that I was investigating why our nation was in the thrall of identity politics, leading to more Americans being divided into race-based groups. Why was this happening, I wanted to know, at a time when Americans were crossing the color line in record numbers?

Then I disclosed that I was multiracial—the offspring of two generations of Americans who married across the color line for love—and that I was not sold on the idea of white privilege. The latter revelation turned the temperature up on the conversation. I argued that the idea of white privilege was nothing more than a modern-day version of the white man’s burden, the racist 19th-century idea that white people had a collective responsibility to educate and modernize the black people who lived in their colonies. I felt the stare from a college counselor sitting across the table with her arms crossed over her black yoga jacket. Her patience was fading as she listened to me and, finally, her voice cut through the conversation and she declared me white.

“But my black ancestors were enslaved by whites, and my Jewish ancestors were hunted in the Holocaust by whites,” I said. “How can you ignore my history, my individuality, and see only my skin color?” Her smile was sympathetic yet she was unconvinced.

Eli Steele is a filmmaker. His newly released documentary, How Jack Became Black, examines identity politics.

Commentary

Eli Steele
The roots of American identity politics are racial and go back to the white-supremacist classification system that defined the eras of slavery and segregation.

This was religion to her.

At that moment, I heard an echo of a not-so-distant past. I remember my father telling stories of his childhood on Chicago’s segregated South Side in the 1950s and ’60s. He couldn’t cross certain streets, caddy the Olympia golf course, or be a ball boy for the local YMCA’s baseball team because he was black. His own father was extremely well-read and ran several businesses in addition to working at his regular job, yet he parked his Rambler blocks away from work to avoid showing up his white boss. If my father and my grandfather ever protested that their humanity should be recognized over skin color, they too got, at best, sympathetic smiles.

Never did I think that what happened to my father and grandfather would happen to me decades later. If I had been born in the 1940s, I’d have been classified as black by the white-supremacist “one drop” rule, according to which someone with even a single black ancestor was deemed black. But I was born in the 1970s, after a succession of civil-rights victories promised that we as a nation were moving away from the evils of racial orders and their social constructs. Yet here I was, being reduced to the color of my skin and being dismissed as white.

The behavior of the college counselor was really no different from that shown by the white bigots of my father’s time. Of course, she would scoff at such a comparison. After all, she saw herself as part of the effort to redeem America’s horrific racial legacy. She was doing her fair share to dismantle her “unearned” privileges as a white woman. But her act of defining me by my skin color revealed that identity politics had become the very thing it promised to defeat: a racial order.

Conservative writers and academics, such as Jordan Peterson and Commentary contributor Matthew Continetti, believe that identity politics has reformulated Marxist class divisions as divisions of race and gender while keeping alive the war between victim and victimizer. It’s true that there is an undeniable Marxist influence at work, but the roots of American identity politics are racial and go back to the white-supremacist classification system that defined the eras of slavery and segregation. It could even be said that white supremacy was America’s very first form of identity politics.

Long before the American Revolution, America was a class-based society in which slaves, free blacks, white indentured servants, and Native Americans intermingled at the lower end of the economic spectrum. In 1676, these destitute individuals sought better living conditions and rebelled against the white ruling class in what became known as Bacon’s Rebellion—and they lost. To prevent future rebellions, the ruling class reorganized what existed of a class-based society into a more strictly race-based society by introducing an early variation of the one-drop rule. Suddenly, wealthy and poor whites were united simply by the virtue of their white skin. Thus the one-drop rule shaped and enforced the racial order of white supremacy.

Americans found themselves reduced to absurd mathematical equations based on racial bloodlines. Individuals such as Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, born to enslaved mothers and white fathers, were classified as mulattos. Those who had three white grandparents were labeled as quadroons, and those with seven white grandparents were octoroon. Yet, in the end, they were all marked Negro or colored to preserve the purity of white blood, especially that of the white woman.

Many Americans protested these dehumanizing constructs. In 1892, two years after Louisiana mandated separate rail cars for whites and coloreds, a man named Homer Plessy boarded the white-only car. As an octoroon, he could have easily passed for white. But he told the conductor that he was colored, and his refusal to move into the colored car led to the Supreme Court case of Plessy v. Ferguson. Ultimately, justice did not prevail and the court’s ruling further embedded the one-drop rule in America’s soil through widespread segregation—de facto and de jure.

One of the forgotten lessons of the civil-rights movement is that many Americans, including my grandparents, fought to end the use of race in public affairs for any reason. They knew that classifying people by race was poison no matter the intention; the Negro box had been judged inferior, the white box superior, and both assessments were lies that had to be destroyed.

After the success of the civil-rights movement, policymakers traded in this binary paradigm for a
system of five primary races to be used on official documentation: white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. While this change was intended to better identify racism in its various forms, it wasn’t long before an activist movement found a larger purpose for these boxes: America’s racial redemption. Americans from every nation on earth were forced into five race boxes, each with its own related historical grievance. The movement championing this paradigm became identity politics, a supposedly redemptive order that would lead America to racial justice.

But if classifying people by race was poison, how could it also be the cure for what ailed our country? It was into this America that I was born a failure. The running joke began in the early 1980s when I, born to a Jewish mother and a black father, failed to fit inside any of the race boxes provided on my school forms. The joke became less funny as I grew older and made the conscious decision not to compromise my racial heritage by forcing myself into one of the provided categories.

As a child, I was fascinated by the story of my grandparents’ interracial marriage in 1944 in segregated Chicago. My parents’ own interracial marriage in 1967 in the same city wasn’t much easier; at the time, America burned with race riots. My grandparents and parents had every reason not to marry across the color line, but they chose love over their racial order. I believe that they were better Americans than the white supremacists opposing their marriages, and, from a young age, I’ve seen it as my birthright to defend the principles of freedom, equality, love, and a greater humanity beyond racial orders of any kind.

When I hit my teens, I encountered a tremendous pressure to conform to one race on school applications and in personal encounters. My identity, which I thought had to do only with the choices I made and the responsibilities I accepted, all of a sudden became currency for someone else’s political power.

But it was not until I applied to college in the early 1990s that I truly saw behind the curtain of identity politics for the first time. By the late 1960s, in hopes of leveling the playing field, universities adopted a system of racial preferences based on the five race boxes, and they gave racial preferences to certain races based on historical grievances. My grades and SATs were borderline acceptable for top-tier colleges, and my high-school counselor, along with most university officials, urged me to boost my chances of being admitted by checking the “black” box on applications. When one university official saw my reluctance, she urged me to reduce my multiple races to one race box in the name of “diversity.” In truth, those who had been freed from the box marked inferior were being objectified all over again in the form of a box now marked “victim.”

But the most troubling aspect of this sham went beyond my own discomfort. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the percentage of all blacks on college campuses who were from lower economic backgrounds had fallen to the single digits. These students had been replaced by middle- to upper-class blacks, Africans, Caribbeans, and multiracials like me. By checking the “black” box, I was being asked to mask over the very problems and inequities that undermined the efforts of lower-class blacks—all so university administrations could claim the pretense of racial redemption through higher enrollment numbers.

Checking the “black” box on college applications would have forced me to enter what I call the minority state of mind. The word “minority” is often used generically along with the word “majority” to refer to population numbers. But the minority is also a social construct used by some on the left to enforce loyalty to the politics of a given oppressed racial group. To enter the minority state of mind therefore meant that I would divorce myself from my larger American identity in order to embrace a far narrower identity based on the politics of race. In my case, that meant embracing a victim mindset in which everything is defined by slavery, segregation, and racism.

If I had indicated “black” on my college applications, it would have opened the door to black scholarships, black-only orientations, black fraternities, black housing, black-oriented majors, black student associations, and so on. How could I have gone through these experiences without becoming beholden to the politics of blackness?

Once I graduated from college, I expected identity politics to weaken and fade away. Instead, it strengthened and became more resilient. In my lifetime, identity politics has grown so powerful that prac-
It was not the killing of Trayvon Martin itself so much as the white and Peruvian identity of the shooter, George Zimmerman, that triggered a war over identity politics.

Since the shooting of Trayvon Martin, identity politics has strengthened its hold on power. It was this very battle for power that defined my experience at that communal table at the White Privilege Conference. Despite my attempts to humanize myself before the college counselor, she refused to back off. I was my white skin. As I watched her walk away from the table with her sympathetic smile, I felt the sting of her superiority, her conviction that she was right.

On the plane home to Los Angeles, I became deeply sad. We are once again becoming a nation that puts race before humanity, I thought. We're betraying the very hope of the civil-rights movement. As I looked out the window, I was reminded of a story that my father told me about my grandfather. It was the early 1970s, before my birth, and my father had told my grandfather that he and my mother were thinking about joining the Black Panthers. My father's hair was picked out into an Afro, and he was running his mouth about black this and black that. After hearing enough, my grandfather stopped him and asked, “What is black?”

This story always stuck with me, though I never quite understood it. Then I realized that I was considering it from the wrong perspective: my father's. When I looked at the story from my grandfather's point of view, I saw that his question revealed something about his psychology and the way he saw himself in relation to America. He lived in an age when the aim of white supremacy was to convince him that he was black and thus inferior. Though his movements were successfully limited, my grandfather's victory over white supremacy was that he never allowed himself to be reduced to mere blackness. He became the very thing that white supremacy feared most: an individual in possession of his own mind. And he held on to that at all costs, even during the most brutal days of segregation when it would have been far easier to surrender. It was his individuality and that of many other Americans that eventually brought down the racial order of white supremacy.

It will take the same kind of courageous individuals to bring down the racial order of identity politics. 
Among the Disbelievers

Why atheism was central to the great evil of the 20th century

By Gary Saul Morson

It's tedious to encounter a “new atheist” intoning arguments against faith that were shopworn in Voltaire’s day. Sooner or later, he will bring up the Spanish Inquisition. To a Russian specialist like me, that example of undeniable religious cruelty is not especially impressive. In its 300-year history in Spain, Portugal, and the New World, the Spanish Inquisition killed a few thousand, perhaps even a few tens of thousands, while in the atheist Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, that was the average toll every week or two. To this objection, the atheist has a ready reply: Atheism had nothing to do with Bolshevik carnage. As Richard Dawkins explains in *The God Delusion*: “What matters is not whether Hitler and Stalin were atheists, but whether atheism systematically influences people to do bad things. There is not the smallest evidence that it does.” This comment displays an ignorance so astonishing that, as the Russian expression goes, one can only stare and spit.

In her new study, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, Victoria Smolkin demonstrates painstakingly that atheism was central to the Bolshevik project. Statements by Bolshevik leaders, Soviet instructions for youth, and the testimony of memoirs all affirm that atheism is essential to Communism. The Bolsheviks intended to create a whole new type of human being, and the first criterion for “the new Soviet person” was that he or she would be an atheist and a materialist. Communism could not be achieved otherwise, any more than one could create a prosperous capitalist society populated by dedicated Franciscan friars.

Bolshevik ethics began and ended with atheism. Only someone who rejected all religious or quasi-religious morals could be a Bolshevik because, as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and countless other Bolshevik leaders insisted, success for the Party was the *only* standard of right and wrong. The bourgeoisie falsely claim that Bolsheviks have no ethics, Lenin explained in a 1920 speech. No, he said; what Bolsheviks rejected was an

Gary Saul Morson is the Lawrence B. Dumas Professor at Northwestern University. His essay “The Moral Urgency of Anna Karenina” appeared in our April 2015 issue.
ethical framework based on God’s commandments or anything resembling them, such as abstract principles, timeless values, universal human rights, or any tenet of philosophical idealism. For a true materialist, he maintained, there could be no Kantian categorical imperative to treat others only as ends, not as means. By the same token, the materialist does not acknowledge the impermissibility of lying or the supposed sanctity of human life. All such notions, Lenin declared, are “based on extra human and extra class concepts” and so are simply religion in disguise. “That is why we say that to us there is no such thing as a morality that stands outside human society,” he said. “That is a fraud. To us morality is subordinated to the interests of the proletariat’s class struggle.” That meant the Communist Party. Aron Solts, who was known as “the conscience of the Party,” explained: “We…can say openly and frankly: yes, we hold in prison those who interfere with the establishment of our order, and we do not stop before other such actions because we do not believe in the existence of abstractly unethical actions.”

Peter Kropotkin, the anti-Bolshevik anarchist, argued in 1899 that revolutionaries were permitted to practice violence, but no more than necessary. His way of thinking suggests that revolutionaries must meet the criterion was the interests of the Party, and so they were trained to overcome their instinctive compassion. For the Bolsheviks, there was no such moral law. The only moral criterion was the interests of the Party, and so they trained followers to overcome their instinctive compassion, which might lead to hesitation before killing a class enemy. Reluctance to kill reflected an essentially religious belief in the sanctity of human life. To them, Kropotkin was a sentimentalist.

For a true atheist, to acknowledge any moral standard “outside human society”—which means outside the Party—was anathema. As the Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin explained: “From the point of view of ideal absolutes and empty phraseology one can attack Soviet ‘authoritarianism’ and ‘hierarchy’ as much as one wishes. But such a point of view is itself empty, abstract, and meaningless. The only possible approach in this regard is the historical one which bases the criteria of rationality on the specific historical circumstances”—that is, on what the Party wants to do at any given moment.

The result was the opposite of Kropotkinism: Violent means were to be preferred. Everyone knew that to hesitate, even for a moment, was to reveal quasi-theological morality. The way to prove one’s atheism, then, was to be as ruthless as possible. Mercy, kindness, compassion: These were all anti-Bolshevik emotions. The older heroes of Solzhenitsyn’s novel In the First Circle grew wary of young Ruska because “Ruska’s whole generation had been trained to think of ‘pity’ as a degrading sentiment, of ‘kindness’ as comic, and of ‘conscience’ as priest’s talk. On the other hand, it had been drilled into them that informing was...a patriotic duty.” As the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev saw right from the start, “to these men pity for suffering became proof of weakness.”

Ethics were reduced to what a character in Vasily Grossman’s novel Forever Flowing identified as a reverse categorical imperative, “a categorical imperative counterposed to Kant”: Always use people as objects. Do unto class enemies what you would not want them to do unto you. That is why, starting in mid-1937, torture was used in all interrogations, not just to extract information. What objection could be raised? Ruthlessness without prompting showed that the torturer harbored no abstract moral standard, even unconsciously. It was a positive good to arrest the innocent. There were special camps for the wives of enemies of the people, campaigns to arrest members of a profession (engineers), and mass arrests by quota. As good Bolsheviks, local NKVD branches asked to arrest even more. “The concept of personal innocence,” a character in Grossman’s greatest novel, Life and Fate, avers, “is a hangover from the Middle Ages.”

Those who came to reject Bolshevik morality have described what it felt like to accept it. “With the rest of my generation, I firmly believed that the ends justified the means,” Lev Kopelev explained. “Our great goal was the universal triumph of Communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible—to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people... And to hesitate or doubt about all this was to give in to ‘intellectual squeamishness’ and ‘stupid liberalism,’ the attributes of people who ‘could not see the forest for the trees.’” Kopelev avidly participated in the collectivization of agriculture, which involved the...
deliberate starvation of several million peasants. Even when he saw “women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes,” it did not strike him as immoral to seize all the peasants’ grain.

Kopelev got into trouble when, as the Russian army entered German territory, he objected to officially encouraging soldiers to rape, kill, and torture civilians. “You engaged in propaganda of bourgeois humanism, of pity for the enemy,” the charge against him went. “You engaged in agitation against vengeance and hatred—sacred hatred for the enemy.”

At home, too, vengeance and hatred were “sacred.” Bolshevik vocabulary reflects the reverse categorical imperative. Formerly good words became bad. In her memoir *Hope Against Hope* (1970), Nadezhda Mandelstam mentions how “the word ‘conscience’... had gone out of ordinary use—it was not current in newspapers, books or in the schools, since its function had been taken over... by ‘class feeling.’” By the same token, “kindness” became something to be ashamed of, and its “exponents were as extinct as the mammoth.” Positive words now included “merciless” and “ruthless,” as well as “total” (as in “total extermination”), “immediate” (as in “immediate execution”), and mass (as in “mass resettlement” or “mass terror”), along with “without exception, without compromise,” and “no halfway measures.” It was good to string these terms together. In 1919, a secret directive insisted that “the only correct strategy is a merciless struggle against the whole Cossack elite by means of their total extermination. No compromises, no halfway measures are permissible.” Even in private correspondence, people with evident sincerity used the same rhetoric: “I am, as usual, merciless toward the enemy, hacking them right and left, annihilating them along with their villainous acts.”

Prominent prosecutor Nikolai Krylenko offered a true Bolshevik apology: “In the period of dictatorship, surrounded on all sides by enemies, we sometimes manifested unnecessary leniency and unnecessary softheartedness.” It was “unnecessary leniency” that required forgiveness, not unnecessary cruelty. One speaker at the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1925 reminisced: “Lenin used to teach us that every Party member should be a Cheka [secret police] agent—that is, he should watch and inform. If we suffer from one thing, it is that we do not do enough informing.” When Nikolai Yezhov replaced Genrikh Yagoda as head of the Soviet Secret Police in 1936, he promised to correct errors in running the forced labor camps. They would no longer be run as “health resorts.” Mandelstam recalled how “the press unleashed a flood of abuse against Yagoda, accusing him of being soft on all the scum in the camps. Who would have thought, we have been in the hands of humanists!”

**Kopelev, Solzhenitsyn, and others described the key event of their lives as the discovery that the universe contains moral laws.**

Is it any wonder that many Russians began to seek absolute standards of right and wrong? They discovered what Solzhenitsyn called “conscience,” by which he meant a strong sense that good was one thing and effectiveness in getting what one wants quite another. Kopelev, Solzhenitsyn, and others described the key event of their lives as the discovery that just as the universe contains causal laws, it also contains moral laws. Bolshevik horror, they recognize, derived from the opposite view: that there is nothing inexplicable in materialist terms and that the only moral standard is political success.

In her celebrated 1967 memoir *Into the Whirlwind*, Lydia Ginzburg describes how her NKVD interrogator tempted her to implicate another person who, he said, had already denounced her. “That’s between him and his conscience,” she demurred, thereby appealing to a moral standard independent of consequences.

“What are you, a gospel Christian or something?” the interrogator replied.

“Just honest,” she said, an answer that provoked him to give her “a lecture on the Marxist-Leninist view of ethics. ‘Honest’ meant useful to the proletariat and to the state.” As a good Leninist herself, she recognized that he was right. She had invoked standards that a Christian, but not a committed atheist, would accept.

“An objective moral order is built into the universe,” declares Gleb Nerzhin, the autobiographical hero of Solzhenitsyn’s *In the First Circle*. His friend Kondrashov concurs: “We ought to spell Good and Evil not just with capitals but with letters five stories high!” In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes how he realized that, Bolshevism notwithstanding, the result is not the only standard of right and wrong. “It is not the result—but the spirit!”

In his fiction and in *Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn recounts again and again how complacent atheism is
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tested by extreme suffering. The atheist worldview proves hopelessly inadequate to the pressure. It cannot even pretend to address the ultimate questions that imminent death, constantly facing one in the Gulag, poses so urgently.

At some point, Solzhenitsyn explains, every prisoner faces a choice. If he adheres to the view that there is only this world and that only the result counts, he will steal food from starving fellow prisoners, become an informant, and do anything, no matter how repulsive, “to survive at any price.”

“This is the great fork of camp life,” Solzhenitsyn concludes. “From this point the roads go to the right and to the left... If you go to the right—you lose your life; and if you go to the left—you lose your conscience.”

In Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*—in my view they make up perhaps the greatest short stories of the 20th century—there is a moment when the narrator must choose whether to defend another prisoner at great cost to himself. “All at once I felt a burning sensation in my chest and I realized that the meaning of my whole life was about to be decided. If I didn’t do anything—what exactly, I did not know—it would mean that my arrival with this group of convicts was in vain, that twenty years of my life had been pointless.”

Would it not be possible to acknowledge an objective moral order and yet not believe in God? To be sure, Bolsheviks identified the two positions, but did those who discovered conscience discover God as well, and, if so, for what reason? In part, it was the example of believers. Memoirist after memoirist, including the atheist Ginzburg, testify that in the camps the only people who consistently chose conscience, even at the cost of their lives, were the believers. It did not seem to matter whether they were Jews, Orthodox Christians, Russian sectarians, or Baptists. Well-educated atheists succumbed readily under pressure, but believers, and believers alone, did not. Ginzburg describes how a group of semiliterate believers refused to go out to work on Easter Sunday. In the Siberian cold, they were made to stand barefoot on an ice-covered pond, where they continued to chant their prayers. Later that night, Ginzburg reports, the rest argued about their behavior: “Was this fanaticism, or fortitude in defense of the rights of conscience? Were we to admire or regard them as mad? And, most troubling of all, should we have had the courage to act as they did?” The recognition that they would not often transformed people of conscience into believers.

**BOLSHEVIK IDEOLOGY DEMANDED** that religion be wiped out. Perhaps even more than constructing dams and factories, creating a population of atheists became the regime’s most important criterion of success. “Atheism [was] the new civilization’s calling card,” as S.A. Kuchinsky, director of the Leningrad State Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, explained.

Communist society could be built only by a new kind of human being, one who would at every moment be guided by *partiinost* (party-mindedness), a singular devotion to the Party’s purposes. *Partiinost* demanded militant atheism (mere unbelief was not enough), and atheism became, as Smolkin observes, “the battleground on which Soviet Communism engaged with the existential concerns at the heart of human existence: the meaning of life and death.”

As Smolkin tells the story, the Party alternated between active persecution and passive discouragement based on the assumption that religion was bound to die out by itself. In Marxist ideology, “being determines consciousness.” Religion exists only because capitalism needs workers to postpone their reward to the other world. Abolish capitalism, and religion will necessarily be abolished along with it. In the West, Smolkin points out, social scientists have embraced “secularization theory,” which, without the Marxist framework, also assumes that as society becomes more advanced, the backward mindset of religion will die of its own accord. In Russia, that didn’t happen.

Nothing worked. Lenin turned the fury of the state on the church. In a letter to the Politburo, he called for a “ruthless battle,” and in this case the adjective “ruthless” was not mere rhetoric. “The greater number of representatives of the reactionary clergy and reactionary bourgeoisie we manage to shoot on this basis, the better,” he explained. Over the next decade, churches were closed and desecrated. The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church was arrested and the patriarchate abolished. The League of the Militant Godless harassed believers and conducted propaganda, while the term “godless” became a constantly repeated word of praise. A Bol-
During World War II, Stalin completely reversed course. Needing desperately to mobilize the population for the war effort, he enlisted religion.

During Easter, by tradition, we eat Easter cakes and paint eggs in our home. But we do not believe in God. I am a Communist, my brother is in the Komsomol, and my father is a Party candidate. Is it really so very bad?

Commentary
fered no real answers to the problems of life. As one researcher asked, “what kind of solace is there when you say that you are mortal, but matter is eternal?” The Party responded by ordering the creation of new Socialist rituals. Instead of just recording a marriage, the registration bureau would conduct a memorable ceremony. The State Planning Commission was instructed to issue 55.9 tons of paper for ceremonial marriage-registry books. To be sure, it took some time to realize that funerals and marriages should not be celebrated next to each other. Then Wedding Palaces and Palaces of Happiness were created. The satirists Il'f and Petrov parodied a birth ceremony by describing how the chair of the local Soviet presented a newborn with a red satin blanket and “standing over the crib of the infant, read a two-hour report on the international situation.” Even those who went through a red ritual often held a religious ceremony, too.

Bolsheviks recognized that they needed to fill atheism with some positive content, but even Party hacks understood that one cannot fabricate a convincing philosophy of life by committee.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he, like Khrushchev, sought a purified Communism and so revived atheism. But in 1988, to everyone’s surprise, he reversed himself. That year the Church was celebrating the millennium of the Christianization of Russia, and Gorbachev met with Patriarch Pimen and gave state sponsorship to the celebration. In the first Soviet multiparty elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989, 300 clergymen, including Patriarch Pimen and Metropolitan Aleksei, were elected.

The writer Vladimir Tendriakov (1923–1984), a committed atheist, quoted the Russian proverb: “A sacred space is never empty.” Dostoevsky had warned that a hideous ideology would fill the gap left by unbelief. He could not have been more right. We might do well to remember G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown: The problem with atheists is not that they believe nothing, but that they will believe anything.
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Politics & Ideas

If I Forget Thee...

The Zionist Ideas: Visions for the Jewish Homeland—Then, Now, Tomorrow
Edited by Gil Troy
The Jewish Publication Society, 608 pages

Reviewed by Jay P. Lefkowitz

The Zionist Idea, published in 1959, was a tour de force for the young rabbi Arthur Hertzberg. He assembled the core writings of more than three dozen Jewish thinkers who began making the key arguments for the necessity of a Jewish State. In his masterful 100-page introductory essay, Hertzberg explained how two cathartic realizations in the late 19th century led to a new Jewish longing to establish Jewish sovereignty in the land over which King David reigned. First, that the European Enlightenment could not deliver on its promise of genuine emancipation to the Jews, and second, that Jews could never feel safe in the Diaspora, as evidenced by the wave of pogroms that spread across Eastern Europe.

I first encountered the book as a high-school senior writing an essay about Zionism and later read it in full at Columbia University, where I was a student of Hertzberg’s before serving as his research and teaching assistant for several years. What I learned from him was that Zionism is a natural outgrowth of Judaism’s bifurcated quality as both a religion and a national identity. And there was no room for that national identity in post-Enlightenment Europe. As Comte de Clermont-Tonnere famously made clear in a speech to the French National Assembly in 1789, “the Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals.”

When Hertzberg published The Zionist Idea, Israel was barely a decade old. It was still a land of pioneers and socialist kibbutzim, and its newest immigrants were mostly survivors of the Holocaust and Jews fleeing North Africa. Israel had been tested in battle twice,
first in its 1948 War of Independence and then in the Suez Crisis eight years later, and both times the nascent Israel Defense Forces had overcome U.S. arms embargoes to vanquish much larger foes. The American Jewish audience for whom Hertzberg was writing by and large romanticized the new Jewish state in terms that would become familiar to millions the following year with the successful screen adaptation of Leon Uris’s *Exodus*—with a blue-eyed 35-year-old Paul Newman the embodiment of every Israel-born sabra.

In the six decades since Hertzberg published his book, the State of Israel has grown into a mature nation, and both the meaning and nature of Zionism has changed. In 1959, only 15 percent of the world’s Jews lived in Israel. Today, Israel is home to 45 percent of the total Jewish population. And while Israel is still surrounded by the same Arab nations it was half-a-century ago, today it has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and even somewhat friendly relations with Saudi Arabia. The image of Israel in 1959, despite its early military successes, was still one of an underdog nation inhabited predominantly by refugees—and for many Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, Israel’s legitimacy was based largely on the fact that it had been founded out of the ashes of the Holocaust. Today, Israel is a nuclear power with one of the most robust economies in the world.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the unparalleled success of the State of Israel, “Zionism” has become for many a dirty word. Though Israel is the only liberal democracy in its region, it is subject to much harsher criticism of its conduct than any of its neighbors—even those nations where male homosexuality is punishable by death (Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) and where female genital mutilation is the norm (Somalia and Egypt). On college campuses across the United States, in the halls of the United Nations, and indeed in polite company throughout much of Europe, to call someone a Zionist is akin to using the N-word, only socially acceptable. In Hertzberg’s day, Zionists were seen as advocates for a powerless people in search of a home. Today Zionists are often equated with colonialists, and Israel is regularly accused of being an apartheid state.

It is therefore a propitious time for Gil Troy, a professor at McGill University, to provide us with an updated version of Hertzberg’s volume. *The Zionist Idea* borrows from Hertzberg and divides the voices in his anthology into the same five basic schools of thought that Hertzberg used—Political Zionism, Labor Zionism, Revisionist Zionism, Religious Zionism, Cultural Zionism—while adding the new category of Diaspora Zionism. Troy includes far more voices than did Hertzberg, with more than 140 new entries. He breaks these down into three overall categories. There are Pioneers, who were involved in founding the Jewish State; Builders, who participated in the modernization of the state in the second half of the 20th century; and Torchbearers, who are involved in a reassessment and reinvigoration of the Zionist idea.

In his introductory essay (parts of which were excerpted in the May issue of *Commentary*), Troy observes that by 2000, just a little over a century after Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel, “the scrappy yet still controversial Zionist movement had outlived Communism, fascism, Sovietism and Nazism.” Why this is so is just one of the many themes of this rich trove, in which questions are posed and answers are offered across the years.

Consider, for example, the lament of Peretz Smolenskin, a Russian-Jewish nationalist whose writings in Hebrew rejected the possibility of Jewish assimilation in Europe. Smolenskin bemoaned the fact that “we have no sense of national honor; our standards are those of second-class people. We find ourselves...exulting when we are tolerated and befriended.” A century later, however, Menachem Begin presented his newly elected government to the Knesset in 1977 and proclaimed that “the government of Israel will not ask any nation, be it near or far, mighty or small, to recognize our right to exist...It would not enter the mind of any Briton or Frenchman, Belgian or Dutchman, Hungarian or Bulgarian, Russian or American, to request for his people recognition of its right to exist.”

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Nor is the issue of anti-Semitism ever far from any discussion of Zionism. Troy includes an essay by Anne Roiphe, the prominent feminist writer, who observed that “all Jewish rivers run toward Israel... Zionism is then the yearning for completion—for the righting of a historical injustice—a response to the ever-present insanity of anti-Semitism.” And, of course, Troy recognizes that even though the Zionist dream was fulfilled by the creation of a sovereign Jewish state, the challenges facing Jews have by no means dissipated. As Hertzberg wrote in a 1977 essay: “We now do battle in our own name; we have the capacity to receive Jews into a Jewish state if that need should arise... On the other hand, we are not ‘like all the other nations.’ Our uniqueness has not ended. It has only been recreated through different means.”

One of the ever-present issues is the relationship between the Jews of the Diaspora and Jews of Israel. From its inception, Zionists were ambivalent about the Diaspora. Some Zionist thinkers envisioned a symbiosis in which Diaspora Jews would support the Jewish state while the existence of a Jewish state would elevate Jews worldwide. Others simply denigrated the Diaspora, maintaining that Jews could only fulfill their potential in their own nation.

Ahad Ha-am, the father of Cultural Zionism, recognized in the late 1890s that “not all the Jews will be able to take wing and go to their state,” but he prophesied that “the very existence of the Jewish state will also raise the prestige of those who remain in exile.” And for many Jews around the world, that has been the case. The early Zionists understood, however, that for their state to succeed, Jews from around the world would have to immigrate to Palestine. And thus a natural tension was born.

A generation after Ahad Ha-am, as the Nuremburg laws began to infect the life of Jews in Germany and Hitler’s Nazi party began its preparation for war, the Revisionist Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky could not contain his contempt for the impotence of European Jewry. “Eliminate the Diaspora,” he warned in 1937, “or the Diaspora will surely eliminate you.”

The question of what it meant to create a Jewish state is another of Troy’s animating themes. At the inaugural ceremony of the Hebrew University in 1918, the poet Haim Nachman Bialik presaged Jabotinsky’s concern: “A people that aspires to a dignified existence must create a culture; it is not enough merely to make use of a culture—a people must create its own, with its own hands and its own implements and materials, and impress it with its own seal... But as whatever the Jew creates in the Diaspora is always absorbed in the culture of others, it loses its identity and is never accounted to the credit of the Jew. Our cultural account in the Diaspora is consequently all debit and no credit.”

It was Ahad Ha-am’s belief that a Jewish state would “become in the course of time the center of the nation.” And there is no question that Israel is well on its way to becoming not only home to a majority of the world’s Jews, but the epicenter of Jewish culture. Troy illustrates this by incorporating an excerpt from an essay by A.B. Yehoshua, one of Israel’s leading novelists and essayists. “A Talmud lesson in a yeshiva or at an institute like Alma, the self-described home for Hebrew culture, has no more ‘Jewish identity’ than a debate by the Committee to Prevent Road Accidents,” Yehoshua wrote. “Any differentiation between them is artificial and dangerous. Because Israeliness is what brings about a total integration between matter and spirit.”

Troy also introduces us to American Jewish Zionist voices that riff on the same theme, like that of Martin Peretz, former publisher of the New Republic: “There is no greater measure of success of Zionism, finally, than the phenomenon of post-Zionism. What really gnaws at the post-Zionist scholars and writers is the spectacle of a Jewish society in which Jews are not always brooding about cosmic questions, in which they sit at cafes, dance in the moonlight, eat good food, make piles of money, chatter on cell phones, have film festivals—all of the activities of an unafraid and unanguished people.”

Troy reminds us that Hertzberg was fond of Oscar Wilde’s line that “there are two tragedies in the world—one is not getting what you
The reality is that nationhood is complicated. And creating both a Jewish state and a liberal democracy in a nation where more than half the Jewish citizens come from nations with no democratic tradition and nearly a third of the residents are not even Jewish has proved complicated and at times ugly.

Troy is not afraid of the messiness of the Zionist project. He recognizes that any serious assessment of Zionism in 2018 must include a discussion of the settlements and the occupation, as well as the civil rights and civil liberties afforded to Israel’s Arab residents, just as it must also include a discussion of the role of religion in public life—another area where Israel’s commitment to liberal democracy is being tested daily.

He includes a speech given by Rabbi Zvi Ehud Kook on the 19th anniversary of the founding of the state (only weeks before the outbreak of the Six-Day War). Kook, who became the spiritual leader of the settlement movement, describes his torn feelings on the day of Israel’s independence and explains why he did not join in the jubilation. “I sat alone and silent; a burden lay upon me.” He was referring to the burden of a divided land. “Where is our Hebron—have we forgotten her?! Where is our shechem, our Jericho—where?” In sharp contrast to the messianic dreams of Kook, Troy quotes Amoz Oz, Israel’s most famous living author, who declared, “I am a Zionist in all that concerns the redemption of the Jews, but not when it comes to the redemption of the Holy Land.”

Troy’s contributors also grapple with the goal of most of Israel’s founders that the state be both Jewish and democratic. These twin objectives are rooted in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. The phrase “Jewish State” appears five times in the document. At the same time, though the word “democracy” doesn’t appear in the Declaration, the aspiration of the state to be a democracy is made clear through the references to “freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture,” and to the document’s promise of “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.” Troy also offers a countervailing view from Shulamit Aloni in 1997: “I hate applying the notion of ‘Jewish’ to my identity as a citizen. For that, I prefer ‘Israeli,’ because Israel is both Jewish and sovereign, with the notion of sovereign entailing responsibility and commitments...The term ‘Jewish identity’ reflects a closed clannishness.”

As early as 1937, Jabotinsky made clear that his solution for achieving both was simply to ensure that the Jews always maintain a majority of the population in Palestine: “There is no question of ousting the Arabs. On the contrary, the idea is that Palestine on both sides of the Jordan should hold the Arabs, their progeny, and many millions of Jews. What I do not deny is that in the process the Arabs of Palestine will necessarily become a minority in the country of Palestine.” That is easier said than done. Today, while Jews constitute about 80 percent of the population of Israel proper, if one includes the territories captured by Israel during the Six-Day War, the Arab and Jewish populations are nearing parity.

At its core, Troy’s anthology is an invitation to readers to consider what it means to be a Zionist, especially in the 21st century. Yehoshua writes that “a Zionist is a person who accepts the principle that the State of Israel doesn’t belong solely to its citizens, but to the entire Jewish people.” Yair Lapid, the media star turned politician, wrote a poem in which he basically described himself as a link in a chain: “I hold on not only to the rights of our forefathers, but also to the duty of the sons.” And there is Ellen Willis, the far-left feminist who came to her Zionism when she determined that she was “an anti-anti-Zionist.” The Arthur Hertzberg I knew was a Zionist to his core, and he was immensely proud of the rabbinic legacy from which he descended. But he was also a liberal 20th-century American Jew who regularly told me that the Zionist pioneer who influenced him the most was Ahad Ha-am, because “the Hebraic values being revitalized and created by the nascent national culture would provide stimulation for all the Jewish world.”

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The death-of-world-order literature is large and growing, and, in *The Jungle Grows Back*, Robert Kagan adds to it by detailing the inception of that order itself. Kagan, a historian and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has in many ways become the biographer of American power. His previous book, *The World America Made*, was a seminal paean to the U.S.-led liberal world order. That book was so influential that it helped inspire President Obama’s State of the Union Address in 2012. “Decline,” Kagan wrote in that missive, echoing the late Charles Krauthammer, “is a choice. It is not an inevitable fate—at least not yet.”

In his current book, Kagan restates his belief that “it is still within our capacity to defend” the liberal world order and “put off its collapse, perhaps for some time.” But the sentiment now reads more like a weary grunt than a full-throated rebuttal.

Kagan sees the liberal world order—a world of “relatively free trade, growing respect for individual rights, and relatively peaceful cooperation among nations”—as a “great historical aberration,” a brief “anomaly” from the “war, tyranny, and poverty” that defined international relations for millennia. But history, backed by henchmen in China, Russia, Iran, and elsewhere, threatens to correct that anomaly. Kagan has been waiting for this. The liberal order, he argues, is “a garden, ever under siege from the forces of history, the jungle whose vines and weeds”—outgrowths of the chaos, brutality, and domination that long defined global affairs—“constantly threaten to overwhelm it.” The vines and weeds, Kagan warns, are here. And, as he recently wrote in the *Washington Post*, “the world crisis is upon us.”

The liberal world order emerged from Washington’s reaction to the wreckage of World War II. Following World War I, the United States focused on commerce, spent little on defense, and dismissed the notion of any possible existential threats. Even after World War I, Americans “had barely realized that there was a world order,” Kagan recounts, “much less that it was one from which they benefited immensely.” The old order, underpinned by European balance-of-power politics and British seapower, largely inoculated the United States from the perils of interstate competition and fostered its rise. Only its collapse convinced Americans that, to preserve their way of life, they had to assume the mantle of a great power and shape a new world.

The American order would not look like all the rest. To build a world where liberal principles could flourish, the United States had to transcend “traditional notions” of national interest, which were limited to “defense of the state’s immediate and physical and economic security.” Instead, as one of the architects of the new order, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, put it, the United States would seek to create “an environment of freedom” beyond its shores. This project would entail building an “open international economy,” as well as supporting democracies in critical areas across the globe. It also meant establishing institutions such as the United Nations that would, in Kagan’s words, “knit the members of the liberal order into what they could regard as a common international community.” No great power had ever defined its national interest in such capacious—and generous—terms.

But Acheson and his collaborators understood that drawing-room diplomacy—such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1929, purporting to outlaw war—would do any such thing. They did not dare to start the world from scratch or cure mankind of strife. Instead, Kagan writes, they “were in many ways pessimists” about international relations, convinced, as Acheson argued, that the world had no “rules, no umpire, no prizes for good boys.” They nonetheless hoped that if the “base and destructive elements of human nature could be contained,” other, better elements “could be unleashed.” In this way, Kagan argues, they drew from America’s Founding Fathers, who designed the U.S. Constitution not to remake mankind but to account for human nature, with its limited wisdom and virtue. Kagan stands alone among...
latter-day defenders of the liberal world order in noting this link and in praising it; his is the tragic case for the world America built.

And in a tragic world, there was only one true guarantor of peace: American power. The progress of the last 70 years was only possible, Kagan argues, “because the most powerful nation in the world since 1945 has been a liberal democratic capitalist nation.”

Under the U.S. security umbrella, fascist Germany and Japan transformed into placid economic powerhouses, democracy flourished, and the United States defeated the USSR without a great-power war. Only the combination of overwhelming U.S. military supremacy and unyielding U.S. commitment to pluralism could convince prideful nations to place their foreign policy, for the first time in history, in another country’s hands. In key parts of the world, America’s presence “provided the opportunity to end the cycle of multipolar military competition” that had culminated in two world wars and countless other conflicts, giving nations the opportunity to compete peacefully.

To be sure, Washington at times ran roughshod over allies, abandoned its ideals, and badly blundered. Yet, as Kagan contends, “compared to what had come before over the previous five thousand years,” America’s garden of egalitarian hegemony represented “a revolutionary transformation of human existence.”

Today, that garden is decaying. Kagan takes readers on a global tour to survey the damage, from Beijing to Brussels. But the real danger to the liberal order, Kagan believes, is spiritual rather than strategic. Rejecting the trendy view that American decline is terminal, he argues that even if the U.S. order inevitably falls, as every order does, the question of when it falls matters a great deal for its present health and what may follow. And even now, he believes, “it is still within our capacity to defend” the order and “put off its collapse, perhaps for some time.”

If the choice remains ours, the number of those willing to choose leadership is dwindling. On the left, Kagan argues, America’s Cold War victory and the halcyon days that followed convinced many that the liberal world order was “the inevitable unfolding of some Universal History” rather than a manifestation of U.S. power. Progress is inevitable, this thinking goes, and therefore the order can sustain itself without U.S. force, which is unnecessarily costly and corrupting. Recalcitrant nations, clinging to their arms and pride, will eventually fall in the ever-advancing line of liberalism. Secretary of State John Kerry epitomized that notion in 2014, when, in reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he said that “you just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th-century fashion.” Kerry and others confuse the buttresses of the system—the UN, the World Trade Organization, and international law—for its foundation, American might. Classic power politics will thus perennially befuddle them.

On the right, meanwhile, a series of foreign-policy disasters, from 9/11 to Syria, fueled skepticism about the efficacy of U.S. power in the first place. Kagan recounts how a “new self-described ‘realism’ came into vogue.” It held that global instability “was intractable... and that rather than fix things the employment of American power only made things worse.” Some conservatives tired not so much of U.S. preeminence as of the self-imposed burden to wield it with restraint. They fumed as China and Russia brazenly bullied opponents and Europe finger-wagged Washington on America’s defensive dole.

Following the Cold War, then, Americans on the left and right tired of the responsible application of U.S. power so central to the world order. For Kagan, this comes down to a failure of imagination and a failure of memory. The postwar “liberal bubble,” he says, has endured just long enough for us to forget “what the world ‘as it is’ really looks like.” how “nations have historically behaved when given the chance,” and how they may behave should that chance present itself once more. He warns that should today’s nascent weeds proliferate, it would spell danger on a level few can appreciate, and with nuclear arsenals in tow.

To those who argue that U.S. support for the liberal world order is problematic, Kagan’s response amounts to “as opposed to what?” This is a reminder of the blessings of American hegemony. But it also suggests a weariness that weighs
down this slim volume. Absent from *The Jungle Grows Back* is a stirring call to action—one that could inspire Americans to embrace the burdens of leadership anew. “Tending the garden” is instead a conservative case for preservation. And the case for preservation is a sober one, rooted less in what we can accomplish than in what we must try to stave off, less in dreaming than in brooding.

The argument for preservation, of course, rallied Americans once before—most notably, to contain the Soviet Union. George Kennan, the author of that strategy, described it as “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment” accomplished by “the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.”

But there are key differences between Kennan’s time and ours. For one, although the architects of the liberal world order didn’t design the system in response to the Soviet Union, Kagan admits that “it is not at all clear” that Americans would have accepted the commitment to lead it “had it not been for” the Kremlin’s emergence. Now, however, Washington is not containing Communism, headquartered in Moscow, but chaos, with multiple sponsors. The disparate authoritarian challenge we face is also not a leftist vanguard but a reactionary rearguard, a confrontation of values rather than ideology. This, Kagan notes, poses a subtler threat than Communism, more “traditional, organic, [and] natural” with an appeal to strength, order, and tribe.

Bereft of a central foe or an organizing principle around which to concentrate their efforts, Americans are left with the idea of preservation alone to motivate their defense of the liberal world order. *The Jungle Grows Back* is a worthy attempt to remind them of what came before that order. Kagan offers an accessible overview of international affairs, an evocative portrait of the mayhem that once governed the globe, and an appreciation of the relative miracle of U.S. might that followed. What’s more, he brings to the page a true sense of the stakes involved—not some abstract notion of the “rules-based order,” but the basic security and prosperity of Americans.
Funny, You Don’t Look Yeshivish

Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law
By Chaim N. Saiman
Princeton University Press, 248 pages

Reviewed by Roberta Rosenthal Kwall

One of the first things many new Talmud students realize is that the sages spend an inordinate amount of time and energy on matters with no apparent relevance to our lives today. So what is the point of Talmudic study? With Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law, Villanova law professor Chaim Saiman offers an account accessible for those unfamiliar with Jewish law that is equally captivating for those with considerable expertise.

Saiman observes that much Talmudic discourse was equally irrelevant to the early centuries of the Common Era, when the Talmud and other early texts of Jewish law were redacted. The laws were formulated with the Jews already in a condition of permanent exile, which meant there was no real-world political community, or state, in which these laws could be applied. Even so, the Talmudic discourse concerning these inapplicable laws is intertwined with discussions of other laws with great practical application to daily life, both then and now.

Regardless of whether the details are, or ever were, applicable to daily life, those who engage in this type of study are playing a key role in Jewish life. Saiman shows the reader why Jewish law, halakhah, is not just “a body of regulations, but a way of thinking, being and knowing.”

The rabbinic texts that are the focus of Saiman’s early chapters have a tendency to speak of these Talmudic laws “as if” they were still operative in the real world—as if the Jews were still governing themselves as a civil society. To illustrate this point, Saiman focuses on capital punishment, with a text specifically from the Mishnah, one of the earliest of the halakhic sources. This text specifically addresses how men and women were to be clothed when being stoned to death. These laws are “as if” because capital punishment was not being practiced during this time.

He demonstrates that according to the Talmud, more clothing on the body prolongs the time it takes to die, and therefore, if a woman is clothed, she will endure more physical pain during her execution than a man. The sages who declare that a female should still remain clothed are saying that it is preferable for her to retain her dignity even at the expense of physical pain. In contrast, one rabbi takes the view that lessening the physical pain of death is more important.

In Saiman’s view, this dispute about stoning reflects “core questions about human nature” that are reflected in today’s policy debates over whether support for the poor should be directed more toward ameliorating physical, or emotional, pain. Saiman’s greater point is that because halakhah is the context through which the rabbis of this period focused on the larger questions of human nature, the rules very much matter even if they were, and are, rarely if ever actualized.

Saiman’s chapter on the European Brisker yeshiva, an institution that dates back to the 19th century, is informative and fascinating—and helps explain why those in the ultra-Orthodox community today retain a single-minded focus on halakhah, including its most obscure details, while they eschew secular education entirely. Because the rules of halakhah are seen as “hard-wired into the fabric of the universe,” nothing can be done to modify certain demands that seem just too burdensome. Although Saiman clarifies that the range of thought among rabbinic thinkers is more expansive than the Brisker method allows, its core ideas still “exert a strong pull on the entire field of halakhic theology.”

In the chapter about Israel,
Saiman illustrates both the theoretical and practical difficulties of relying on halakhah as a way to govern a modern state, particularly one in which a majority of citizens do not meticulously observe Jewish law. Saiman argues that it is more useful to think of Israel's identity as “Jewish” rather than halakhic—a country whose voters see themselves as “decidedly Jewish though not necessarily bound to halakhah.”

Saiman's concluding section suggests that introducing people to the life of studying halakhah would be a useful way to increase Jewish religious observance in general. Perhaps, but here Saiman is writing from the perspective of a Torah student already committed to religious practice. Those who do not have his experience but find themselves drawn to religion as adults seem guided not by the intellectualism of Talmud Torah but rather by elements that touch their heart and soul. The aspects of Talmud Torah that are most likely to reach nonobservant and less knowledgeable people are agaddot, textual narratives, rather than the discussions of “as if” legal prescriptions.

Even if there is a bit of rose coloring to Saiman's prescriptions, the book that contains them is a wonderful achievement.

The Choice Is Hers

**Sex Matters: How Modern Feminism Lost Touch with Science, Love, and Common Sense**

*By Mona Charen*

Crown Forum, 320 pages

Reviewed by Karol Markowicz

What do women want? The joke has always been that men have no idea. But do women themselves know? *Sex Matters,* by Mona Charen, argues that women do know their own preferences but are encouraged by modern feminism to make choices that don't suit them. Charen, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, rebuffs the idea that sex differences are “socially constructed” and argues instead that women are born motivated to do things that men simply are not, and vice versa. She quotes the late French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who said that women should have limited choices to “force [them] in a certain direction. Women with options won’t tend to make the choices that feminism demands of them.”

But even when presented with those odious “options,” women mostly gravitate in one direction. We find examples of this tendency in all strata of society. Even Kourtney Kardashian of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* cries because she sometimes has to work away from her kids. No similar laments come from the father of her children, Scott Disick. Reality shows might not always be the best reflection of culture, but they do sometimes expose some...reality. Sex matters, it turns out. Men and women are different.

“The mother-child bond is the strongest in human life,” writes Charen. “Only in the direst circumstances (war, famine, severe illness) do women abandon their children, and even then, abandonment is rare. The same cannot be said for men. The data on divorced fathers show that when men are alienated from the mothers of their children, they often permit relationships with their children to decay as well.” For modern feminism to survive, this reality must be ignored.

The denial of differences between the genders is ultimately what leads to so much unhappiness. Can a man be happy staying home and raising his children? Certainly, and more men make that choice today than ever before. But will there ever be a tipping point where more men will be pulled to that vocation than women? There won’t be, and Charen argues that we must come to accept this. The equality that feminists seek can’t come without the understanding that what men and women want out of life will seldom be the same thing.

Charen touches on many of the ways in which feminism has led women to make poor decisions for their lives. She addresses hook-up culture, abortion, and the devaluation of marriage. But it’s on the topic of “having it all” that Charen makes her most effective point. “Since the dawn of second-wave feminism,” she writes, “Western societies have been attempting to fit women's lives into a male model and forever falling short.”
It’s long been a cliché that women get offended when they are asked how they manage to do it “all.” It’s a question that men aren’t asked, so the thinking goes, because there’s no expectation for men to be heavy hitters at work while also making muffins for their kids’ school bake sale. It’s only women who are presented with the idea that they must be at the top of their game at work and at home to have it “all.”

Charen challenges this idea by considering what we learn from taking in the bigger picture. “If women make less money than men, or get fewer promotions, they are the losers,” she writes. “But viewing the world this way misses things. You cannot separate women’s success from that of the men and children to whom they’re attached.” Women’s prioritizing family over financial success isn’t strange or bad, and it isn’t something that society needs to overcome. For all the frequent hand-wringing over why so few women end up becoming CEOs of companies, the reason is obvious. In study after study, we find that women are choosing not to take that position. In one study Charen cites, 85 percent of women said that “working with people they respected, being able to ‘be themselves’ at work, and flexible schedules were all more important than salary.”

Charen doesn’t pretend that sex discrimination doesn’t exist. “Women do face prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of sex, and that must be combated,” she writes. “But our obsessive focus on discrimination as the only explanation of differing life paths misses a huge fact of life.” That fact is that women don’t necessarily want what men want; equality doesn’t have to mean sameness. Women don’t occupy 50 percent of CEO positions not because they are being discriminated against, but because they are making different, yet still entirely valid, choices.

Sex matters is as much a celebration of womanhood as an explanation of all the ways that women and men differ. “The feminist narrative places an excessive focus on the burdens rather than the pleasures of femininity devaluing the best parts of life—and dare I say, the most admirable aspects of our natures,” Charen writes. Being a woman isn’t the grim experience feminists make it out to be, nor is it the same experience as being a man. We’d all be happier if we stopped pretending that sex didn’t matter.
Commentary Magazine’s twice weekly podcast is hosted by John Podhoretz, Noah Rothman, Abe Greenwald and Sohrab Ahmari.

THE COMMENTARY MAGAZINE PODCAST

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Is American opera in terminal condition?
By Terry Teachout

Fifty years ago, New York was home to a pair of world-famous opera companies. Respectively headquartered kitty-corner from each other in the brand-new Lincoln Center campus, the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera were jointly responsible for setting the tone for opera in America at a time when large-scale productions of the operatic classics could be seen only in a handful of other American cities.

At the Met, distinguished singers and conductors, mostly born and trained in Europe, appeared in theatrically conservative big-budget productions of the popular operas of the 19th century, with a sprinkling of pre-romantic and modern works thrown in to leaven the loaf. City Opera, by contrast, presented younger artists—many, like Beverly Sills, born in this country—in a wider-ranging, more adventurously staged repertoire that often included new operas, some of them written by American composers, to which the public was admitted at what were then called “popular prices.”

Between them, the companies represented a feast for culture-consuming New Yorkers, though complaints were already being heard that their new theaters were too big. Moreover, neither the Met nor City Opera was having any luck at commissioning memorable new operas and thereby expanding and refreshing the operatic repertoire, to which only a handful of significant new works—none of them, then or since, premiered by either company—had been added since World War I.

A half-century later, the feast...
has turned to famine. In 2011, New York City Opera left Lincoln Center, declaring bankruptcy. It closed its doors forever two years later. The Met has weathered a nearly uninterrupted string of crises that climax ed earlier this year with the firing of James Levine, the company’s once-celebrated music director emeritus. He was accused in 2017 of molesting teenage musicians and was dismissed from all of his conducting posts in New York and elsewhere. Today the Met is in dire financial straits that threaten its long-term survival.

And while newer opera companies in such other American cities as Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, Santa Fe, and Seattle now offer alternative models of leadership, none has established itself as a potential successor either to the Met or the now-defunct NYCO.*

Is American opera as a whole in a terminal condition? Or are the collapse of the New York City Opera and the Met’s ongoing struggle to survive purely local matters of no relevance elsewhere? Heidi Waleson addresses these questions in Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America.** Waleson draws on her experience as the opera critic of the Wall Street Journal to speculate on the prospects for an art form that has never quite managed to set down firm roots in American culture.

In this richly informative chronicle of NYCO’s decline and fall, Waleson persuasively argues that what happened to City Opera (and, by extension, the Met) could happen to other opera companies as well. The days in which an ambitious community sought successfully to elevate itself into the first rank of world cities by building and manning an opera house are long past, and Mad Scenes and Exit Arias helps us understand why.

A S WALESON reminds us, it was Fiorello LaGuardia, the New York mayor who played a central role in the creation of the NYCO, who dubbed the company “the people’s opera” when it was founded in 1943. According to LaGuardia, NYCO existed to perform popular operas at popular prices for a mass audience. In later years, it moved away from that goal, but the slogan stuck. Indeed, no opera company has ever formulated a clearer statement of its institutional mission.

Even after it moved to Lincoln Center in 1966, NYCO had an equally coherent and similarly appealing purpose: It was where you went to see the opera stars of tomorrow, foremost among them Sills and Plácido Domingo, in inexpensively but imaginatively staged productions of the classics. The company went out of its way to present modern operas, too, but it never did so at the expense of its central repertoire—and tickets to its performances cost half of what the Met charged. Well into the 21st century, City Opera stuck more or less closely to its redefined mission. Under Paul Kellogg, the general and artistic director from 1996 to 2007, it did so with consistent artistic success. But revenues declined throughout the latter part of Kellogg’s tenure, in part because younger New Yorkers were unwilling to become subscribers.

In those days, the Metropolitan Opera, NYCO’s next-door neighbor, was still one of the world’s most conservative opera houses. That changed when Peter Gelb became its general manager in 2006. Gelb was resolved to modernize the Met’s productions and, to a lesser extent, its repertoire, and he simultaneously sought to heighten its national profile by digitally simulcasting live performances into movie theaters throughout America.

Kellogg was frustrated by the chronic acoustic inadequacies of the New York State Theater and sought in vain to move City Opera to a three-theater complex that was to be built (but never was) on the World Trade Center site. He retired soon after Gelb came to the Met. Kellogg was succeeded by Gérard Mortier, a European impresario who was accustomed to working in state-subsidized theaters. Mortier made a pair of fateful decisions. First, he canceled City Opera’s entire 2008–2009 season while the interior of the State Theater underwent much-needed renovations. Then he announced a follow-up season of 20th-century operas that lacked audience appeal.

That follow-up season never happened, because Mortier resigned in

* The “New York City Opera” founded in 1943 that now mounts operas in various New York theaters on an ad hoc basis is a brand-new enterprise that has no connection with its predecessor.

** Metropolitan Books, 304 pages
2008 and fled New York. He was replaced by George Steel, who had previously served for just three months as general manager of the Dallas Opera. Under Steel, NYCO slashed its schedule to ribbons in a futile attempt to get back on its financial feet after Mortier's financially ruinous year-long hiatus. Then he mounted a series of productions of nonstandard repertory that received mixed reviews and flopped at the box office.

The combined effect of Gelb's innovations and the inept leadership of Mortier and Steel all but obliterated City Opera's reason for existing. Under Gelb, the Met's repertoire ranged from such warhorses as Rigoletto and Tosca to 20th-century masterpieces like Benjamin Britten's Midsummer Night's Dream and Alban Berg's Wozzeck, and tickets could be bought for as little as $20. With the Met performing a more interesting repertoire under a wider range of directors, and in part at "people's prices," City Opera no longer did anything that the Met wasn't already doing on a far larger and better-financed scale. What, then, was its mission now? The truth was that it had none, and when the company went under in 2013, few mourned its passing.

As it happened, Gelb's own innovations were a mere artistic Band-aid, for he was unwilling or unable to trim the Met's bloated budget to any meaningful extent. He made no serious attempt to cut the company's labor costs until a budget crisis in 2014 forced him to confront its unions, which he did with limited success. In addition, his new productions of the standard-repertory operas on which the Met relied to draw and hold older subscribers were felt by many to be trashily trendy.

The Met had particular difficulty managing the reduced circumstances of the 21st century when it came to opera. Its 3,800-seat theater has an 80-foot-deep stage with a proscenium opening that measures 54 feet on each side. (Bayreuth, by contrast, seats 1,925, La Scala 2,030, and the Vienna State Opera 2,200.) As a result, it is all but impossible to mount low-to-medium-budget shows in the Metropolitan Opera House, even as the company finds it is no longer able to fill its increasingly empty house. Two decades ago, the Met earned 90 percent of its potential box-office revenue. That figure plummeted to 66 percent by 2015, forcing Gelb to raise ticket prices to an average of $158.50 per head. On Broadway, the average price of a ticket that season was $103.86.

Above all, Gelb was swimming against the cultural tide. Asked about the effects on audience development of the Met simulcasts, he admitted that three-quarters of the people who attended them were "over 65, and 30 percent of them are over 75." As he explained: "Grand opera is in itself a kind of a dinosaur of an art form…. The question is not whether I think I'm doing a good job or not in trying to keep the [Metropolitan Opera] alive. It's whether I'm doing a good job or not in the face of a cultural and social rejection of opera as an art form. And what I'm doing is fighting an uphill battle to try and maintain an audience in a very difficult time."

Was that statement buck-passing defeatism, or a fair appraisal of the state of American opera? Other opera executives distanced themselves from Gelb's remarks, and it was true—and still is—that smaller American companies have done a somewhat better job of attracting younger audiences than the top-heavy Met. But according to the National Endowment for the Arts, the percentage of U.S. adults who attend at least one operatic performance each year declined from 3.2 percent in 2002 to 2.1 percent in 2012. This problem, of course, is not limited to opera. As I wrote in these pages in 2010, the disappearance of secondary-school arts education and the rise of digital media may well be leading to "not merely a decline in public interest in the fine arts but the death of the live audience as a cultural phenomenon."*

* See my "The Decline of the Audience" (Commentary, April 2010).
productions of grand operas [is] no longer an achievable goal.”

If that is so, then it may be worth asking a different question: Did American opera ever have a past? It is true that opera in America has had a great and glorious history, but virtually the whole of that history consisted of American productions of 18th- and 19th-century European operas. By contrast, no opera by an American classical composer has ever entered the international major-house repertoire. Indeed, while new American operas are still commissioned and premiered at an impressive rate, few things are so rare as a second production of any of these works.

While a handful continue to be performed—John Adams’s *Nixon in China* (1987), André Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1995), Mark Adamo’s *Little Women* (1998), and Jake Heggie’s *Dead Man Walking* (2000)—their success is a tribute to the familiarity of their subject matter and source material, not their musico-theatrical quality. As for the rest, the hard but inescapable truth is that with the exception of George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935), virtually all large-scale American operas have been purpose-written novelties that were shelved and forgotten immediately after their premieres.

The success of *Porgy and Bess*, which received its premiere not in an opera house but on Broadway, reminds us that American musical comedy, unlike American opera, is deeply rooted in our national culture, in much the same way that grand opera is no less deeply rooted in the national cultures of Germany and Italy, where it is still genuinely popular (if less so today than a half-century ago). By comparison with *Porgy, Carousel, Guys and Dolls*, or *My Fair Lady*, American opera as a homegrown form simply does not exist: It is merely an obscure offshoot of its European counterpart. Aaron Copland, America’s greatest composer, was not really joking when he wittily described opera as “la forme fatale,” and his own failed attempts to compose an audience-friendly opera that would be as successful as his folk-flavored ballet scores say much about the difficulties facing any composer who seeks to follow in his footsteps.

It is not that grand opera is incapable of appealing to American theatergoers. Even now, there are many Americans who love it passionately, just as there are regional companies such as Chicago’s Lyric Opera and San Francisco Opera that have avoided making the mistakes that closed City Opera’s doors. Yet the crises from which the Metropolitan Opera has so far failed to extricate itself suggest that in the absence of the generous state subsidies that keep European opera houses in business, large-house grand opera in America may simply be too expensive to thrive—or, ultimately, to survive. At its best, no art form is more thrilling or seductive. But none is at greater risk of following the dinosaurs down the cold road to extinction.

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**By a Captain, He’s No Captain**

**Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual**

By Nathan Abrams

Rutgers University Press, 340 pages

Reviewed by Frederic Raphael

WILLIAM Goldman tells of having delivered a script to Sidney Pollack and then coming upon the director typing it out, word for word. Asked what the hell he thought he was doing, Pollack replied: “I’m making it my own.” A startling but not silly answer: Whatever a director finds indigestible, in his creative gut, is threatened with excision. Stanley Kubrick only reluctantly agreed on the inclusion of the billiard-room scene in *Eyes Wide Shut* that caps the movie (and in which Sydney Pollack plays a key character). I wrote it. A screenwriter’s most useful quality is not deference.

Except for Stanley Donen, every director I have worked with has been prone to the idea, first propounded in the 1950s by François Truffaut and his tendentious chums in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, that directors alone are authors, screenwriters merely contingent. In singular cases—Orson Welles, Michelangelo Antonioni, Woody
Allen, Kubrick himself—the claim can be valid, though all of them had recourse, regular or occasional, to helping hands to spice their confections.

Kubrick's variety of topics, themes, and periods testifies both to his curiosity and to his determination to "make it new." Because his grades were not high enough (except in physics), this son of a Bronx doctor could not get into colleges crammed with returning GIs. The nearest he came to higher education was when he slipped into accessible lectures at Columbia. He told me, when discussing the possibility of a movie about Julius Caesar, that the great classicist Moses Hadas made a particularly strong impression.

While others were studying for degrees, solitary Stanley was out shooting photographs (sometimes with a hidden camera) for Look magazine. As a movie director, he often insisted on take after take. This gave him choices of the kind available on the still photographer's contact sheets. Only Peter Sellers and Jack Nicholson had the nerve, and irreplaceable talent, to tell him, ahead of shooting, that they could not do a particular scene more than two or three times. The energy to electrify "Mein Führer, I can walk" and "Here's Johnny!" could not recur indefinitely. For everyone else, "Can you do it again?" was the exhausting demand, and it could come close to being sadistic.

The same method could be applied to writers. Kubrick might recognize what he wanted when it was served up to him, but he could never articulate, ahead of time, even roughly what it was. Picking and choosing was very much his style. Cogitation and opportunism went together: The story goes that he attached Strauss's Blue Danube to the opening sequence of 2001 because it happened to be playing in the sound studio when he came to dub the music. Genius puts chance to work.

Until academics intruded lofty criteria into cinema/film, the better to dignify their speciality, Alfred Hitchcock's attitude covered most cases: When Ingrid Bergman asked for her motivation in walking to the window, Hitch replied, fatally, "Your salary." On another occasion, told that some scene was not plausible, Hitch said, "It's only a movie." He did not take himself seriously until the Cahiers du Cinéma crowd elected to make him iconic. At dinner, I once asked Marcello Mastroianni why he was so willing to play losers or clowns. Marcello said, "Beh, cinema non e gran' cosa" (cinema is no big deal). Orson Welles called movie-making the ultimate model-train set.

That was then; now we have "film studies." After they moved in, academics were determined that their subject be a very big deal indeed. Comedy became no laughing matter. In his monotonous new book, the film scholar Nathan Abrams would have it that Stanley Kubrick was, in essence, a "New York Jewish intellectual." Abrams affects to unlock what Stanley was "really" dealing with, in all his movies, never mind their apparent diversity. It is declared to be, yes, Yiddishkeit, and in particular, the Holocaust. This ground has been tilled before by Geoffrey Cocks, when he argued that the room numbers in the empty Overlook Hotel in The Shining encrypted references to the Final Solution. Abrams would have it that even Barry Lyndon is really all about the outsider seeking, and failing, to make his awkward way in (Gentile) Society. On this reading, Ryan O'Neal is seen as Hannah Arendt's pariah in 18th-century drag. The movie's other characters are all engaged in the enjoyment of "goyim-naches," an expression—like menschlikhayit—he repeats ad nauseam, lest we fail to get the stretched point.

Theory is all when it comes to the apotheosis of our Jew-ridden Übermensch. So what if, in order to make a topic his own, Kubrick found it useful to translate its logic into terms familiar to him from his New York youth? In Abrams's scheme, other mundane biographical facts count for little. No mention is made of Stanley's displeasure when his 14-year-old daughter took a fancy to O'Neal. The latter was punished, some sources say, by having Barry's voiceover converted from first person so that Michael Hordern would displace the star as narrator. By lending dispassionate irony to the narrative, it proved a pettish fluke of genius.

While conning Abrams's volume, I discovered, not greatly to my chagrin, that I am the sole villain of the piece. Abrams calls me "self-serving" and "unreliable"
my accounts of my working and personal relationship with Stanley. He insinuates that I had less to do with *Eyes Wide Shut* than I pretend and that Stanley regretted my involvement. It is hard for him to deny (but convenient to omit) that, after trying for some 30 years to get a succession of writers to "crack" how to do Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle*, Kubrick greeted my first draft with "I'm absolutely thrilled." A source whose anonymity I respect told me that he had never seen Stanley so happy since the day he received his first royalty check (for $5 million) for *2001*. No matter.

Were Abrams (the author also of a book as hostile to *Commentary* as this one is to me) able to put aside his waxed wrath, he might have quoted what I reported in my memoir *Eyes Wide Open* to support his Jewish-intellectual thesis. One day, Stanley asked me what a couple of hospital doctors, walking away with their backs to the camera, would be talking about. We were never going to hear or care what it was, but Stanley—at that early stage of development—said he wanted to know everything. I said, "Women, golf, the stock market, you know..."

"Couple of Gentiles, right?"

"That's what you said you wanted them to be."

"Those people, how do we ever know what they're talking about when they're alone together?"

"Come on, Stanley, haven't you overheard them in trains and planes and places?"

Kubrick said, "Sure, but...they always know you're there."

If he was even halfway serious, Abrams's banal thesis that, despite decades of living in England, Stanley never escaped the Old Country, might have been given some ballast.

Now, as for Stanley Kubrick's being an "intellectual." If this implies membership in some literary or quasi-philosophical elite, there's a Jewish joke to dispense with it. It's the one about the man who makes a fortune, buys himself a fancy yacht, and invites his mother to come and see it. He greets her on the gangway in full nautical rig, She says, "What's with the gold braid already?"

"Mama, you have to realize, I'm a captain now."

She says, "By you, you're a captain, by me, you're a captain, but by a captain, are you a captain?"

As New York intellectuals all used to know, Karl Popper's definition of bad science, and bad faith, involves positing a theory and then selecting only whatever data help to furnish its validity. The honest scholar makes it a matter of principle to seek out elements that might render his thesis questionable.

Abrams seeks to enroll *Lolita* in his obsessive Jewish-intellectual scheme by referring to Peter Arno, a *New Yorker* cartoonist whom Kubrick photographed in 1949. The caption attached to Kubrick's photograph in *Look* asserted that Arno liked to date "fresh, unspoiled girls," and Abrams says this "hint[s] at Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*." Ah, but *Lolita* was published, in Paris, in 1955, six years later. And how likely is it, in any case, that Kubrick wrote the caption?

The film of *Lolita* is unusual for its garrulity. Abrams's insistence on the sinister Semitic aspect of both Clare Quilty and Humbert Humbert supposedly drawing Kubrick like moth to flame is a ridiculous camouflage of the commercial opportunism that led Stanley to seek to film the most notorious novel of the day, while fudging its scandalous eroticism.

That said, in my view, *The Kill-
Commentary

second- and third-hand accounts of the president's oddity and depravity into bestselling prose was unmistakable. Imitators were sure to follow, especially after Wolff alienated himself from the mainstream media by defending his innuendos about Haley.

It was during the first week of September that Resistance Porn became a competitive industry. On the afternoon of September 4, the first tidbits from Bob Woodward's *Fear* appeared in the *Washington Post*, along with a recording of an 11-minute phone call between Trump and the white knight of Watergate. The opposition began panting soon after. Woodward, who like Wolff relies on anonymous sources, “paints a harrowing portrait” of the Trump White House, reported the *Post*.

No one looks good in Woodward’s telling other than former economics adviser Gary Cohn and—again bizarrely—the former White House staff secretary who was forced to resign after his two ex-wives accused him of domestic violence. The depiction of chaos, backstabbing, and mutual contempt between the president and high-level advisers who don’t much care for either his agenda or his personality was not so different from Wolff’s. What gave it added heft was Woodward’s status, his inviolable reputation.

"Nothing in Bob Woodward’s sober and grainy new book...is especially surprising," wrote Dwight Garner at the *New York Times*. That was the point. The audience for Wolff and Woodward does not want to be surprised. *Fear* is not a book that will change minds. Nor is it intended to be. “Bob Woodward’s peek behind the Trump curtain is 100 percent as terrifying as we feared,” read a CNN headline. "President Trump is unfit for office. Bob Woodward’s ‘Fear’ confirms it," read the longest background quote in American history. That the author’s identity remains a secret only adds to its prurient appeal.

"The bigger concern," the author wrote, “is not what Mr. Trump has done to the presidency but what we as a nation have allowed him to do to us.” Speak for yourself, bud. What President Trump has done to the Resistance is driven it batty. He's made an untold number of people willing to entertain conspiracy theories, and to believe rumor is fact, hyperbole is truth, self-interested portrayals are incontrovertible evidence, credulity is virtue, and betrayal is fidelity—so long as all of this is done to stop that man in the White House.
Resistance Porn

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

THE PECULIARITIES, tropes, and characters of more than a year and a half of salacious books and articles about President Trump and his associates have congealed into a new literary genre. Speculative, vague, unaccountable, inflammatory, conspiratorial, and occasionally obscene, these anecdotes titillate the imagination of Trump’s fiercest opponents, driving them into ecstasies of outrage, Twitter-thread convulsions, and shrieking denunciations of the president, his family, and his employees. It’s a special brand of writing. Call it Resistance Porn.

Michael Wolff is its Marquis de Sade. Released on January 5, 2018, Wolff’s Fire and Fury became a template for authors eager to satiate the growing demand for unverified stories of Trump at his worst. Wolff filled his pages with tales of the president’s ignorant rants, his raging emotions, his television addiction, his fast-food diet, his unfamiliarity with and contempt for Beltway conventions and manners. Wolff made shocking insinuations about Trump’s mental state, not to mention his relationship with UN ambassador Nikki Haley. Wolff’s Trump is nothing more than a knave, dunce, and commedia dell’arte villain. The hero of his saga is, bizarrely, Steve Bannon, who in Wolff’s telling recognized Trump’s inadequacies, manipulated him to advance a nationalist-populist agenda, and tried to block his worst impulses.

Wolff’s sources are anonymous. That did not slow down the press from calling his accusations “mind-blowing” (Mashable.com), “wild” (Variety), and “bizarre” (Entertainment Weekly). Unlike most pornographers, he had a lesson in mind. He wanted to demonstrate Trump’s unfitness for office. “The story that I’ve told seems to present this presidency in such a way that it says that he can’t do this job, the emperor has no clothes,” Wolff told the BBC. “And suddenly everywhere people are going, ‘Oh, my God, it’s true—he has no clothes.’ That’s the background to the perception and the understanding that will finally end this, that will end this presidency.”

Nothing excites the Resistance more than the prospect of Trump leaving office before the end of his term. Hence the most stirring examples of Resistance Porn take the president’s all-too-real weaknesses and eccentricities and imbue them with apocalyptic significance. In what would become the standard response to accusations of Trumpian perfidy, reviewers of Fire and Fury were less interested in the truth of Wolff’s assertions than in the fact that his argument confirmed their preexisting biases.

Saying he agreed with President Trump that the book is “fiction,” the Guardian’s critic didn’t “doubt its overall veracity.” It was, he said, “what Mailer and Capote once called a nonfiction novel.” Writing in the Atlantic, Adam Kirsch asked: “No wonder, then, Wolff has written a self-conscious, untrustworthy, postmodern White House book. How else, he might argue, can you write about a group as self-conscious, untrustworthy, and postmodern as this crew?” Complaining in the New Yorker, Masha Gessen said Wolff broke no new ground: “Everybody” knew that the “president of the United States is a deranged liar who surrounded himself with sycophants. He is also functionally illiterate and intellectually unsound.” Remind me never to get on Gessen’s bad side.

What Fire and Fury lacked in journalistic ethics, it made up in receipts. By the third week of its release, Wolff’s book had sold more than 1.7 million copies. His talent for spinning

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Palestinian Mythology

Palestinian Arabs claim full ownership of the Holy Land, denying any Jewish connection or rights—all based on deceptive lies, all easily proven false.

In this era of “fake news,” it’s often hard to tell truth from fiction. Indeed, Palestinian Arab leaders have constructed an elaborate false mythology to justify their war against Israel and the Jewish people. It’s time to lift the curtain on these myths—to separate truth from fabrication.

What are the facts?

Every ethnic group has the right to create its own narrative—but such a narrative should be based on truth, especially when it denies the rights of others. We may disagree on interpretation, but at least we should agree on the facts. So, let us consider five cornerstones of the Palestinian narrative and judge their moral strength by adherence to the truth. We soon find that modern Palestinian myths are unfair attempts to disenfranchise the Jewish people from Israel—their ancestral homeland.

1. Palestinians are indigenous to the Holy Land: False. President Mahmoud Abbas often claims Palestinians are related to the Canaanites, a group that vanished 2,300 years ago. This claim has no basis in archeological or genetic research. Nearly all Palestinians trace their lineage to Arab lands. What’s more, unlike the Jews, Palestinians have no unique language, culture or religion—essential markers of indigenous peoples. Indeed, historians, archeologists, biblical records, and the Koran itself affirm conclusively that Jews founded a kingdom in the Holy Land some 3,000 years ago—before arrival of the Arabs—and have lived in the lands of present day Israel, Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) ever since.

2. Israel occupies Palestinian land: False. Mr. Abbas and even mainstream media frequently refer to “Palestinian land.” In truth, the Palestinians have never had a state, nor have they had sovereignty over any land in the Middle East. Aside from individual private holdings, there is no defined public Palestinian land in the disputed territories. Nonetheless, Israel has many times offered to turn over most of land it won after its defensive war against Jordan in 1967 in exchange for peace, but the Palestinians have refused all those offers.

3. Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinian people. False. Palestinian leaders commonly herald Jerusalem as a Muslim and Christian capital—unfairly excluding 3,000 years of Jewish history and Jerusalem’s centrality to Judaism. Indeed, history shows King David founded Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish kingdom around 1000 BCE, before the advent of Islam. Jerusalem is cited 669 times in the Hebrew bible and not a single time in the Koran. Moreover, Jerusalem has never been an Arab capital, and for most of the city’s history, Jews have been the majority population.

4. Palestinians have a right of return to Israel: False. Among approximately 700,000 Arabs who left Israel in 1948, when five Arab armies attacked, only about 30,000 are still alive today. Some live in the disputed territories of Judea and Samaria, and many over the 70 years have made homes in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Nonetheless, the Palestinians claim that 5.5 million descendants of these refugees—children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren—are also refugees. No other descendants in history have ever been considered refugees. Indeed, no displaced refugees, let alone descendants, have inherent legal rights to return to their original homes after a war. Any such returns have always been negotiated among the parties—and so they will be in a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

5. Israel is guilty of apartheid against the Palestinians: False. Palestinian leaders frequently accuse Israel of committing genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid. In fact, Israel’s two million Arab citizens enjoy full civil rights and benefits—greater than those in Arab nations. Palestinians in the West Bank, on the other hand, are largely self-governing, have increased dramatically in number over the decades, and enjoy a higher standard of living than any of their Arab neighbors. Limitations on Palestinian movement within the West Bank exist only when necessary to prevent Arab terrorism against Israelis, which continues to this day. In short, accusations of discriminatory subjugation of Palestinians by Israel are false and malign.

The Nazis continuously repeated “the Big Lie” to convince the people to wage an imperialistic, genocidal war. Today, Palestinians repeat falsehoods to convince the world that Jews are evil, colonial usurpers. Until the Palestinians agree to negotiate peace with Israel—in good faith and based on truth—they are sadly condemned to bitterness and thwarted aspirations for independence.

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