Commentary

February 2019 : VOLUME 147 NUMBER 2

BY JOSEF JOFFE

EUROPE DOES NOT EXIST

BY JOSEF JOFFE

IN DEFENSE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH
JAMES PETHOKOUKIS

 chopin
TERRY TEACHOUT

THE ATTACK ON LUCK
BY NOAH ROTHMAN
FEBRUARY 2019
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Commentary

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To the Editor:

In his article, (“The Know-Nothing Excommunicators,” December), Seth Mandel writes: “From the pens and pulpits of the American Jewish left come the writs of cherem for those with unacceptable political opinions.” Later in the article he adds, regarding the criticism of Donald Trump, that the Jewish left wants “to settle political scores.”

This principle, on which the article is based, is entirely false. Indeed, it is shameful. The criticism comes not because of politics but emanates from anti-Semitism, racism, hate, lies, corruption, etc.

Mr. Mandel does not mention the anti-Semitic caricature of Hillary Clinton that Trump distributed; Trump’s final TV campaign ad, which was reminiscent of ideas in the Elders of the Protocols of Zion; the anti-Semitic slurs that flooded the chat room at the GOP convention during the speech of former governor of Hawaii, Linda Lingle, a Jew, and Trump’s silence on the matter; Trump’s appointments of Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka and their ties to anti-Semites; Trump’s stating that the “both sides” in Charlottesville included some “very fine people”; and his use of Charles Lindbergh’s “America First” slogan.

Nor does Mr. Mandel mention that anti-Semitic incidents increased 50 percent in 2017, the first full year of Trump’s administration. Jonathan Weisman, in his book (((Semitism))) Being Jewish in the Age of Trump, states that Trump ran the most anti-Semitic campaign in modern American history. Mr. Mandel? The word “anti-Semitism” appears exactly once in his article, and he uses it in passing.

There was a reason that former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke said that the night of Trump’s victory was the happiest of his life, while Richard Spencer, the white-supremacist leader, greeted the victory with a “Hail Trump.”


West Bloomfield, Michigan

Seth Mandel writes:

I APPRECIATE Berl Falbaum’s letter, and I share much of his concern about President Trump’s handling of anti-Semitism. But his vitriol is misplaced.

My essay was not about putting Donald Trump in cherem. The question was whether “Trump’s Jewish enablers,” as one writer put it, should be cast out. That descriptor has been principally applied to three categories of “enabler”: a Jew who works for the Trump administration; a Jew who is related to Trump; or a Jew who supports the electoral success of the party Trump leads.

My answer is twofold. First, this expansive web of guilt is both dis-
honest and dangerous—especially to the Jewish community. And second, as I point out in the piece, even in some cases where rabbinical authorities could plausibly make the case for cherem, it was seen as a reckless and disruptive act that warranted divine punishment. Which is to say, you don’t have to approve of working for the U.S. government during Trump’s presidency to disapprove of what is unmistakably disproportionate retaliation.

I would add as well that Mr. Falbaum has been ill served by the sources he marshals to make his case. Presumably Mr. Falbaum is referring to the Anti-Defamation League’s survey when he mentions the recent surge in anti-Semitic incidents (though I believe the ADL pegged it at a 60 percent increase, not 50 percent). As law professor David Bernstein has demonstrated at length, those numbers were inflated by nearly 200 acts in which the perpetrator was later conclusively shown to have no connection to the president or right-wing ideology at all. Additionally, the ADL notes that increased reporting probably accounts for some of the overall spike, and that many of the incidents took place on college campuses, hardly bastions of alt-right hate.

As for relying on a claim by Jonathan Weisman, well—we can mention that his book was panned as shallow and ignorant by both left and right, or we can point out that he recently wrote the following sentence on Twitter, after Alice Walker recommended an anti-Semite in the pages of the New York Times: “I didn’t know David Icke and I wrote a book on rising bigotry.”

Mr. Falbaum’s heart is surely in the right place, but let’s just say it’s a good thing he reads Commentary.
Considering
Kavanaugh

To the Editor:

WHAT NOAH ROTHMAN describes is essentially the extension of “affirmative action”—from college admissions and job-hiring to our judicial system—undermining the basic principle of equal protection under the law (“The Social-Justice Injustice,” December). Social justice is like a virus that infects the very cells we depend on to protect us. Things don’t get any more insidious than that.

STANLEY SPATZ
Hollywood, Florida

To the Editor:

NOAH ROTHMAN uses the words of Brett Kavanaugh’s persecutors in the press and the Senate to show—irrefutably and chillingly—that they cared not a whit about what he did or didn’t do as a teenager.

The ideology of identity was the only thing that mattered. The individual fate of the enemy was of no consequence.

Let’s be clear about what these people represent: It is Stalinism writ small.

HOWARD F. JAECKEL
New York City

Noah Rothman writes:

IN A WAY, Stanley Spatz is correct. Modern social-justice activism is an extension of efforts to achieve racial equality through policies that encourage positive discrimination, such as affirmative action. Traditionally, advocates for that kind of social leveling have tried to paper over the fact that positive discrimination also necessitates negative discrimination. What distinguishes this form of social-justice activism from its predecessors is that oppressive discrimination is seen by its advocates not as an unfortunate byproduct but as the primary desired effect. As for Howard F. Jaeckel’s point, those who may benefit from the reckoning that privileged white males such as Bret Kavanaugh presumably deserve are a secondary consideration. The objective is to mete out the come-uppance due those of certain circumstances of birth. It’s prejudice, pure and simple, but prejudice is nothing new. What’s truly shocking is how many elites in positions of influence have adopted it.

Charitable Deductions

To the Editor:

JAMES PIERESON and Naomi Schaefer Riley miss the mark (“The Givers and Their Attackers,” December). We should not be distracted by the way in which the “givers” earned their wealth or the relative merits of the recipients of their donations. The fundamental point is that charity is defined by giving away one’s own money, not other people’s money. Providing a tax deduction for charitable contributions means that for every dollar donated, another 50 cents (or more for the high-tax states) is forcibly contributed by other taxpayers.

The charitable tax deduction is immoral in concept, and it incentivizes fraud and corruption in practice. The benefits accrue exclusively to high-income taxpayers who itemize their deductions. Lower-income Americans contribute their hard-earned dollars but receive no tax benefit, because they take the standard deduction. Moreover, the tax deduction applies only to monetary and property donations but not to the time and effort donated by millions of hard-working Americans.

The corruption, both legal and illegal, associated with donation of property is endemic. Donations of stock are valued at their appreciated worth, but taxes are never paid on the gain. Thus, wealthy “benefactors” such as Ted Turner gave away appreciated stock to the UN, and more than 75 percent of the value was recouped in the tax avoidance and deduction. Rich environmentalists like the board members of the Nature Conservancy donate the “value” of easements to protect the views of their beach houses. Donations of art and vehicles are routinely overvalued for tax deductions. Foundations, such as the infamous Clinton Foundation, are established to employ friends, relatives, and political allies, with the payments for staff, contractors, and luxurious travel expenses subsidized by the taxpayers.

The idea that a tax deduction is needed to support charitable institutions is flawed, and it demeans the motives of donors. The vast
majority of Americans donate their time and money with no contribution from unwilling taxpayers. The current system is designed by the rich for the benefit of the rich—it undermines the moral value of charity.

The authors are correct that the end result of government-supported charity will be government-controlled charity. Their concern is warranted. If you accept government funding, you must live by government rules. But the only solution is to end the tax deduction for charitable contributions as soon as possible. Let people give away their own money, not other people's.

Seth Schwartz
Dickerson, Maryland

James Piereson and Naomi Schaefer Riley write:

Much of what Seth Schwartz says about the charitable deduction is accurate. There is no doubt that the charitable exemption is abused in many cases. On the other hand, charitable donations fund a large nonprofit sector that employs 10 percent or so of the U.S. workforce and does a great deal to strengthen America's civil society.

But our piece was not intended as a defense of the policy. We are mainly disagreeing with the increasingly popular idea that the charitable deduction requires wealthy people to donate charitable dollars to the poor, or to causes favored by liberals. Indeed, many of the charitable deduction's critics (including Rob Reich) suggest that the effectiveness of tax policy with regard to philanthropy—indeed, philanthropy itself—should be judged only based on how much it redistributes wealth. This judgement reflects not only a misunderstanding of the policy's purpose but also an overly narrow and shortsighted view of America's generosity.

Seth Schwartz
Dickerson, Maryland

Sporting Lives

To the Editor:

Once again, kudos to my favorite writer Joseph Epstein for articulating my thoughts about contemporary sports figures—many of whom are spoiled, pampered babies (“Our Gladiators,” December). One of the main reasons that NFL viewing is down is that some players take a knee during the national anthem. Their lack of respect for those who have no knees to bend because of war injuries is an affront to many. Their political commentary has nothing to do with sport. Mr. Epstein is correct in acknowledging Tiger Woods's public persona (grim, sour, temperamental). Woods is so focused on competition that he loses sight of the pleasure that should come with such talent. As far as the Brooklyn Dodgers moving to California, there was a time when the two most hated people in Brooklyn were Adolf Hitler and Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley. But O’Malley was forced to move because there was no parking around Ebbets Field. As one sportswriter quipped, “The home of the Dodgers is harder to get into than the Social Register and harder to get out of than Alcatraz.”

I enjoy high-school sports—except for some of the immature behavior of the players’ parents. And I also enjoy Mr. Epstein’s graceful writing and perceptive insights.

Jenene Stookesberry
Denver, Colorado

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The Psychological War on Masculinity

CHRISTINE ROSEN

If you are a psychologist concerned about the health and well-being of boys and men, there are many matters to which you might turn your attention: In the United States, these would include drug use, high suicide rates, educational achievement rates that lag far behind those of women, and shortened life expectancy, to name just a few. But if you examined the recently issued American Psychological Association guidelines for practitioners who treat boys and men, you would think the main challenge facing men today is masculinity itself.

Masculinity, according to the report, is a “particular constellation of standards that have held sway over large segments of the population, including: anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence.” In a summary of the study on the APA’s website, Stephanie Pappas writes of the guidelines, “Thirteen years in the making, they draw on more than 40 years of research showing that traditional masculinity is psychologically harmful and that socializing boys to suppress their emotions causes damage that echoes both inwardly and outwardly.”

And so “traditional masculinity” now joins “patriarchy” as an abstract but menacing force that exercises complete power over its hapless conduits (men) who then wield it to harm everyone else. (Patriarchy does not go unmentioned in the guidelines; as psychology professor Ronald F. Levant told Pappas, “though men benefit from patriarchy, they are also impinged upon by patriarchy.”)

What, then, will the kinder, gentler, nontraditional masculinity ushered in by the APA’s eager practitioners look like? Reading the report, you’d be forgiven for thinking you’d stumbled across a term paper written by a mediocre women’s-studies major. Theory and jargon suffuse the very first guideline, which states, “Psychologists strive to recognize that masculinities are constructed based on social, cultural, and contextual norms.” We are told that “dominant masculinity was historically predicated on the exclusion of men who were not white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and privileged.”

By guideline three we are, predictably, reading about the impact of “power, privilege, and sexism,” and readers are reminded that “male privilege often comes with a cost in the form of adherence to sexist ideologies designed to maintain male power that also restrict men’s ability to function adaptively.”

The report is heavily biased against masculine characteristics, which are asserted (without proof) to be harmful and which psychologists are encouraged to quash. As one clinician told Pappas, “the clinician’s role... can be to encourage men to discard the harmful ideologies of traditional masculinity (violence, sexism) and find flexibility in the potentially positive aspects (courage, leadership).” Note that when positive aspects of traditional masculinity are mentioned, they are merely “potentially positive,” while things like violence and sexism are described unequivocally as “ideologies of traditional masculinity.”

Missing entirely from the report is any mention of the one real thing (as opposed to made-up post-structuralist theoretical things) that does impact men: testosterone...
one. Instead we read of “heteronormative assumptions” and “binary identity” and “microaggressions.” As Toby Young noted in the Spectator, “the word ‘transgender’ occurs more often (56) than ‘masculine’ (53).” As for what psychologists should do with men who are stubbornly, traditionally masculine, the guidelines advise: “Strive to create psychoeducational classes and workshops designed to promote gender empathy, respectful behavior, and communication skills.” Group hug, everyone!

Even when the guidelines properly identify some of the challenges facing boys (such as the fact that they are falling behind girls academically), its authors miss an opportunity to deal with actual challenges as opposed to theoretical ones. Why is the educational system more amenable to traditionally female behavior in the classroom than to male behavior? At the elementary-school level, where most teachers are female and where the supposed pathologies of boys (e.g., difficulty sitting still and concentrating) often first emerge, such behavior is viewed as early evidence of the disease of “traditional masculinity” rather than an understandable expression of frustration with a system that doesn’t always take the needs of young boys into account.

And so the guidelines paint boys as the bad guys ruining school for everyone else. Although they concede that “addressing the school-related problems of boys is also important,” they deem it so “because many of the problems posed by boys in schools (e.g., classroom disruption, poor organization, sexual harassment, bullying, discourtesy) have a detrimental impact on the academic and social experiences of other students.” As to what is causing Johnny to squirm in his chair during social studies or bother his classmate when he’s distracted? Easy: “Constricted notions of masculinity emphasizing aggression, homophobia, and misogyny may influence boys to direct a great deal of their energy into disruptive behaviors such as bullying, homosexual taunting, and sexual harassment rather than healthy academic and extracurricular activities.”

As these guidelines reveal, an abstraction like “traditional masculinity” brings confusion rather than clarity to the challenges facing boys and men. It also provides convenient cover to ideologically motivated psychologists who would rather complain about broader structural forces than engage with the messy realities of male patients who, like ever other person on earth, are merely trying to navigate life’s many challenges.

Attacks on masculinity sacrifice the best interests of individual patients to service a political agenda. Consider the final guideline offered in the report: “Work with public health officials to disseminate information regarding the destructive aspects of rigid notions of masculinity may result in inclusion of gender-sensitive public health initiatives for boys and men. Psychologists also are encouraged to advocate for more financial support for research studies aimed at boys and men with special attention to neglected areas of research, such as examining masculinity with other social identity–based experiences.”

Consider a father involved in a custody battle. What happens when he takes his son hunting and online describe the world as divided between real men (themselves) and “soy boys” (everyone who disagrees with them). Their reactionary masculinity and puerile posturing is unlikely to be improved by psychologists hectoring them about their male privilege and “boy code” norms.

These guidelines will effectively be APA policy for the next 10 years, serving as the guideposts for all therapists who treat male patients. In a culture already rife with casual misandry and one where hyperemotional responses move at the speed of Twitter, there is plenty of room for a virtue like stoicism, which the APA claims is harmful to men. Left-leaning psychologists might not like men who embody stoicism, or the competitive instinct that fuels high achievers, or the disciplined aggression that makes for an ideal soldier, but our world would be a less free and prosperous place without them.

In The Triumph of the Therapeutic, Philip Rieff noted, “Power is one thing. Authority another. Therapeutics derive their authority from their role faiths.” As these new APA guidelines suggest, today’s adherents of the therapeutic faith worship the false god of intersectionality. One can only hope that this modern Baal will eventually enjoy the fate of its predecessor.

Left-leaning psychologists might not like men who embody stoicism, or the competitive instinct that fuels high achievers, or the disciplined aggression that makes for an ideal soldier, but our world would be a less free and prosperous place without them.
OLD-TIMERS will remember the era when getting profiled on 60 Minutes was a cultural laurel almost as impressive as making the cover of Time. It meant you were Somebody! Even so, 60 Minutes can still pack a punch. When the show devoted its first segment of its first show of the new year to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the freshly minted congresswoman from the Bronx and Queens, the buzz in Washington easily lasted for, my heavens, a good half an hour—maybe even an hour. Then we went back to thinking about President Trump.

Let me linger a moment longer on Ocasio-Cortez, or AOC, as her fans, among whom I include myself, call her. Already her “personal story” has become universally known among the politically sentient, and Anderson Cooper shared it with viewers of 60 Minutes, too. It’s a fairy tale for our progressive moment—a Cinderella story as told by Saul Alinsky.

Ocasio-Cortez was born in the Bronx less than 30 years ago to Spanish-speaking parents who met in Puerto Rico. Her father ran a small business; her mother cleaned houses to make ends meet. They bought a modest house in Westchester to spare their little girl the indignities of a Bronx childhood. When the father died, during her sophomore year at Boston University, loans and scholarships allowed Ocasio-Cortez to finish her degree in something called “international relations”—ideal training, as it happened, for her ensuing careers as a community organizer, political gadfly, and bartender. It was the bartending, no surprise, that kept the wolf from the door. When veterans of the Bernie Sanders campaign asked her to undertake a long-shot challenge to a veteran Democratic congressman in the 2018 primary, she said sure.

This average-Joe Millennial narrative helped, but her route to success lay through Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We are long past the time when politicians pretended to be embarrassed about the “inauthentic” show-biz machinery of image-making and self-promotion. AOC’s use of social media calls to mind Astaire dancing or Rickey Henderson swiping second. It is effortless mastery. Buzzfeed’s Katherine Miller—no millennial sentimentalist—compared her with other politicians praised for their social-media savvy. “If Cory Booker is pretty good at Instagram as far as politicians go,” Miller wrote, “the vibe’s still sometimes like your Bible study leader giving you a college campus tour. Ocasio-Cortez uses Instagram [as] the rest of us do—reflectively, incidentally.”

AOC broadcast her campaign in daily, sometimes hourly, installments. And then, during downtime at Starbucks or cooking an Instant Pot dinner in her shoebox apartment, she would speak directly into her phone’s camera and take questions from her rapidly expanding flock of followers (now numbering more than 2 million on each medium). Once elected, she took them all along with her to what she wittily called Congress Camp—orientation for freshman legislators. She never passed up a chance to be tendentious: She lamented the “painful” sight of statues of patriarchal forebears in Statuary Hall and said the “supernice” grandeur of Washington’s Union Station proved that “infrastructure is worth investing in.” (Noted.) Her dispatches were and are mesmerizing, proselytizing, and normalizing, all at once.

Andrew Ferguson’s column last month was about Charles Krauthammer.
But from the beginning her fans have come for more than politics. AOC is a package deal. She uses her own life story as a lesson in uplift and self-improvement, and the effect is as American as a Gordita Crunch. If she can live the dream, you can too! “You are good enough to do whatever you want,” she said in an early Instagram post. “You are beautiful enough ... you can grow through your imperfections. And you can start—right—now.” Mr. Alinsky, meet Tony Robbins.

Her inevitable gaffes—to use the Washington word—have led some of her political adversaries to think she’s a ditz. A few of her missteps are just the sloppy, wishful thinking of the ideologue, as when she misread a story in the Nation magazine to say that the Pentagon had a pile of missappropriated funds lying around (room number unspecified), totaling $21 trillion. Why oh why, she wondered, couldn’t that money be spent on Medicare for all?

Other mistakes are a symptom of the disability, common among politicians, known as mormouth, as her enthusiasm to explain the world to the rest of us outraces her capacity to choose words properly. Speaking in her mile-a-minute mode on Facebook one evening, she seemed to suggest that the federal government consisted of three chambers, which she later corrected to branches—identified, alas, as the House, the Senate, and the White House. A pretty fundamental mistake, yes, but America would be a happier place if every Democrat forgot about the Supreme Court so readily.

In the world of Washington gaffe-making, this is small potatoes, especially considering that her every word—her every tweet and Facebook share, her every Instagram story and YouTube vid—draws the scrutiny of many million people, fans and detractors alike. Gathered into a little pile, in fact, the gaffes are dwarfed by the mountain of Palinisms that Republicans snorted derision. But that’s the way they took a week off for what she called “self-care,” and nials like about her. Before Congress convened, AOC was a millennial. As Miller pointed out, that’s what millennials like about her. Before Congress convened, AOC took a week off for what she called “self-care,” and Republicans snorted derision. But that’s the way they talk these days! Besides, when I first began covering Congress, in the 1980s, certain legislators frequently disappeared for a week or two. Their staffs discreetly called it a vacation; the rest of us knew it as “detox.”

AOC shows no signs of substance abuse. Indeed, it’s far more likely that the force of her icy discipline will be mismeasured. You see the discipline in matters large and small. In the way she dramatizes her past, for example: She is careful to speak of lessons learned “when I was scrubbing toilets with my mom.” As house cleaners, she and her mother were probably polishing a lot of pewter sconces too, but she knows which chore hits a nerve in the retelling. When reliably liberal “fact-checkers” slagged her misreading of the Nation article, she had the brass to accuse them of pro-Trump bias, and not a single Democrat did a spit take.

Sexism, too, of course: A dim-witted conservative journalist tweeted a picture of her walking down a hallway stylishly dressed in seemingly pricey couture—his way of zinging the working-class poormouthing that is an essential part of her persona. (She frets that she can’t afford an apartment in Washington.) AOC pretended his intent was salacious. “If I walked into Congress wearing a sack, they would laugh and take a picture of my backside,” she wrote. “If I walk in with my best sale-rack clothes, they laugh and take a picture of my backside.” She’s flattering herself, but the congresswoman knows what she’s doing.

Charisma is a value of the left; it is changeable, sensational, superficial, subrational, and almost always a distraction from what’s essential. It also doesn’t last. I’m not so sure this will hold true in the case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Already she has proved herself much smarter and less dopey than Republicans and even the establishment media want her to be.

People say you don’t understand how to play the game,” Anderson Cooper said to her on 60 Minutes. “I think it’s really great for people to keep thinking that,” Ocasio-Cortez said.

“So you want folks to underestimate you?”

“Of course! That’s how I won!”

Commentary
This is a moment of astronautical milestones. In December, we commemorated the 50th anniversary of Apollo 8, when three American astronauts took the first picture of "earth-rise" while reading aloud from the story of creation in Genesis. This was a triumphant moment for America, a theological rejoinder to the Khrushchev chortle in 1961 that "Gagarin flew into space but didn’t see any god there." In 2019, we will mark half a century since Neil Armstrong took "one small step for man." And as we prepare to commemorate the first man on the moon, we would do well to ponder the last (as yet).

In 1972, Gene Cernan prepared to leave the lunar surface and clamber back aboard Apollo 17. No further moon landing was planned. Suddenly, before boarding, Cernan paused, bent over, and etched the letters "TDC" in the moon dust at his feet. These are the initials of his daughter, Tracy Dawn Cernan. Because there is no weather on the moon, Tracy’s initials will be on the lunar surface for millions of years, or, as Cernan put it, the letters will be there "forever, however long forever is."

It is a striking story. An astronaut, engaged in a human triumph achieved by few others in his time, and by no one else in the entire course of human history, pauses at the last moment not to celebrate himself, but to emphasize his eternal connectedness to another. Interestingly, Cernan himself was later at a loss to explain what had impelled him to engage in this singular paternal gesture. "I had no plans to do that," he reflected in an interview. "It just seemed like the thing to do at the time...I just did it, and I can’t tell you why."

Cernan’s loving gesture in his last moment on the moon reflects something profound about human nature. In the years that American astronauts sought supremacy over the Soviet Union, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

Who knows what kind of loneliness is more agonizing: the one which befalls man when he casts his glance at the mute cosmos, at its dark spaces and monotonous drama, or the one that besets man exchanging glances with his fellow man in silence? Who knows whether the first astronaut who will land on the moon, confronted with a strange, weird, and grisly panorama, will feel a greater loneliness than Mr. X, moving along jubilantly with the crowd and exchanging greetings on New Year’s Eve at a public square?

—Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 1965
Soloveitchik (my great-uncle) wrote and published some of the century's most significant essays in Jewish thought. "The Lonely Man of Faith" was composed soon after Sputnik; his "Majesty of Humility" was finished soon after Cernan returned to Earth. It is clear that the space race was very much on his mind, and his insights are even more striking half a century later.

Utilizing verses in Genesis, Soloveitchik describes two competing drives within human beings, a divinely willed dialectic at the core of our nature. One aspect of ourselves seeks a "dignified existence"—the conquest of nature, technological mastery, and exploration of the unknown. The 20th-century quest to "slip the surly bonds of earth" was not, for Soloveitchik, a Prometheus-like intrusion into the heavens; on the contrary, the conquest of space is the greatest manifestation of man being made in the Almighty's image: "Man reaching for the distant stars is acting in harmony with his nature which was created, willed, and directed by his Maker."

Yet for all the biblical grandeur made manifest in the astronaut's achievement, that reflects only half of our selves. A life of technological achievement, and of awe-inspiring exploration, does not create a life of meaning: "An atheist cosmonaut circling the earth, advising his superiors who placed him in orbit that he did not encounter any angels, might lay claim to dignity because he courageously mastered space; he is, however, very far from experiencing a redeemed existence."

Soloveitchik foresaw a danger facing the West. America's celebration of its technological achievements during the space race might ultimately efface the other equally important aspect of human nature, a desire for communion with others: "There, not only hands are joined, but experiences as well; there, one hears not only the rhythmic sound of the production line, but also the rhythmic beat of hearts starved for existential companionship and all-embracing sympathy." A fierce anti-Communist, Soloveitchik no doubt rejoiced in the planting of the American flag on the moon; at the same time, he worried that the West's focus on its technological achievements alone could lead to the amputation of the other aspect of its identity.

Indeed, we face today, as many have noted, an epidemic of loneliness. We live in an age of stunning technological transformation that has seemingly increased connectedness but helped decrease community. We can cross the entire earth in less than a day; our correspondence can cross the earth in an instant; and yet we have not found the fellowship that we need. "The same technology that has liberated us from so much inconvenience and drudgery," Ben Sasse recently reflected, "has also unmoored us from the things that anchor our identities. The revolution that has given tens of millions of Americans the opportunity to live like historic royalty has also outpaced our ability to figure out what community, friendships, and relationships should look like in the modern world." Gene Cernan remembering his daughter while looking at Earth from the moon is more than a familial gesture; it is a reminder that even the most extraordinary cosmic achievement cannot compensate for the other side of ourselves, which demands fellowship with others beyond ourselves.

It is hard to fathom that so many years have gone by in which we have not returned to the moon. "Look up from your BlackBerry one night," Charles Krauthammer wrote 10 years ago, on the 40th anniversary of Armstrong's landing. "That is the moon. On it are exactly 12 sets of human footprints—untouched, unchanged, abandoned. For the first time in history, the moon is not just a mystery and a muse, but a nightly rebuke." Technology has progressed in leaps and bounds since Krauthammer wrote those words in 2009, and yet no 13th set of footprints has joined the first 12. We seem to have lost our will to explore.

But that is not all that much of the Western world has lost. As we mark the 50th anniversary of the greatest technological achievement in human history, we would do well to remember that footprints are not the only remnant of man's visit to the moon, and that the three letters lovingly and eternally etched into the lunar surface may tell us more about our humanity than any other event during those halcyon years when we sought to explore the heavens.
By the Numbers, the European Union is a giant. Its economy exceeds China’s by $7 trillion and is just a bit smaller than America’s $20 trillion. Russia? Its GDP of $1.7 trillion is petty cash. On paper, the EU nations marshal as many soldiers as does the United States, and half a million more than Russia. Their combined population dwarfs both. But if one measures by its weight in world affairs, Europe is a runt.

It does not play in the superpower league, and it does not muster the will to do so, no matter how splendiferous the rhetoric of “self-reliance” and “self-assertion.” The cause is rooted in postwar history. Europe was shattered and had to rebuild, and so came to rely for its existential safety on the United States. At the height of the Cold War, up to 300,000 U.S. troops, backed up by thousands of tactical nuclear weapons, stood guard at the Iron Curtain. Then at the end of the last century, its deadly foe, the Soviet Union, simply vanished, committing suicide on Christmas Day 1991 and leaving behind Russia and 14 orphan republics.

Europe was now “whole and free,” as George H.W. Bush famously proclaimed, and life was sweet. Why dabble in power politics when history had ended,
when capitalism and democracy were on a roll? For the next 25 years, the nations of the EU cashed in their peace dividends, whittling their armies down to the core. Europe now gloried in its avant-garde role as a “civilian power” or “power of peace.”

Take Germany, Europe's largest country and the world's fourth-largest economy. After the Berlin Wall fell 30 years ago, the forces of the reunited country were cut by two-thirds. Its 2,800 tanks dwindled to 280. Today, its navy has six U-boats, none of which is operational. When Europe acts, it does so behind the United States, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia, and Libya or, if alone, out of real harm's way, as in Mali.

The halcyon days are over. Europe confronts new threats aplenty. Indeed, at no time since the birth of European integration in 1952 has the Old Continent faced so many perils all at once, inside and out.

Plotting to Restore
Russia's grandeur, Vladimir Putin is pressing on Europe from the east. He gobbled up Crimea, then sliced off Ukraine's southeast with his local surrogates. A new round of confrontation is unfolding in the Sea of Azov, where the Russians intercepted three Ukrainian naval vessels late last year, foreshadowing the blockade of Mariupol, Ukraine's third-busiest port.

Putin's purpose is to strangle Ukraine until it submits to Moscow's imperial ambitions. The Nord Stream gas pipelines between Russia and Germany (one is completed, the other under construction) are designed to tighten the noose on Kiev, circumventing Ukraine by pumping gas directly across the Baltic Sea. Dutifully protesting, Europe has neither the means nor the will to defend Ukraine, and economic sanctions are not popular. The three Baltic states, formerly Soviet possessions, are not amused. Though they are NATO and EU members, the Baltics might be the next victims of Russian hauteur.

From the south, Europe is besieged by vast civilian armies. North Africa is the EU's Mexico, serving as springboard for potentially millions of African migrants in search of a better life. Muslim refugees from the Mideast keep streaming into highly regulated economies that are far less equipped than the United States to absorb “tired, poor, and huddled masses.” High minimum wages and barriers to market entry undercut the greatest advantage of immigrants throughout the ages, which is their willingness to work more for less. New York's all-night Korean markets would run afoot of mandated shop-closing hours throughout the European Union.

The pace of assimilation in Europe keeps lagging behind the rate of immigration. The market for anti-immigrant parties is booming. With the great exception of Spain, they have captured seats in all of the Continent's parliaments; in seven countries, foremost among them Italy and Austria, they co-govern or vote with the ruling coalition. Europe's traditional parties are losing out to the extremes. The moral of this tale: A munificent welfare state and open borders of the kind initially welcomed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2015 do not for a happy marriage make. They spawn resentment, envy, and cultural pushback.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump is muscling in with his trade wars against the EU. He thinks that Uncle Sam has been suckered into protecting wealthy free riders who have outsourced their security to the United States. Shape up, or we ship out, his message runs. Naturally, the Europeans are nervous, especially those on NATO's eastern border. Don't blame Trump alone, if you want to blame someone; it was Barack Obama who brought down U.S. forces to some 30,000. During the Cold War, the number was 10 times higher. It was Obama who told the Atlantic: “Free riders aggravate me.” Trump has actually boosted the U.S. military presence in Europe. Nor should we ignore that Europe's NATO members have been increasing defense outlays since 2014 when Vladimir Putin grabbed Crimea. But money doesn't buy everything.

In the end, the reason Europe isn't rising to the moment is that “Europe” does not exist—not as a state and not as a strategic actor that can hold its own among the resolute superpowers.

To Be Sure, the EU has made magnificent strides toward “ever closer union,” as the 1957 Treaty Establishing the European Community envisioned its future. It has installed various accoutrements of a state: a European Parliament, a Court of Justice, a Commission as quasi-executive, a common currency, a growing body of Community law, even integrated battle groups. The EU has “Pesco,” or “Permanent Strategic Cooperation,” the pledge to pool defense resources and contribute combat units for EU missions.

Unfortunately, these feats do not add up to a U.S.E., a United States of Europe. Real power is lodged in the national parliaments and executives. The EU-28 (soon minus Britain) do not an e pluribus unum make.

Modern history knows no example where nation-states voluntarily coalesced into one. The United Kingdom is the product of endless war among the warring tribes of the Isles. Germany's 25 city-states and kingdoms were fused by “iron and blood” in 1871, to invoke Bismarck's famous phrase. In the beginning, the Thirteen Colonies did strike a peaceful deal in Phila-
delphia. But in the end, it took a murderous civil war to fuse North and South into one nation. In those four years, more Americans died than in all wars thereafter.

Unification will not be achieved by committees hashing it out in Brussels. Or by national parliaments emasculating themselves for the sake of the greater European good. To bestride the world as a heavyweight like the United States requires cracking the hard shells of sovereignty, notably in matters of defense and public finance.

Never in our lifetime will this Europe go to war because a majority of member states says so. Nor will elected governments hand over spending and taxation to Brussels—not when their fate at the ballot box hangs on the state of the business cycle. No national parliament will give up the power of the purse, the Holy Grail of democratic governance.

Cracking these shells would require fusing 27 post-Brexit states into one, complete with a supreme legislature like Congress and an elected executive like the U.S. president. Yet power in Europe remains rooted in the European Council representing 27 governments jealously guarding their turfs.

To list such deficits is not to belittle how many chunks of sovereignty the EU has already pried off. The largest is monetary union, which unites 19 of the 27 in the eurozone. Still, the common currency may well have been one bridge too far, as the recurrent crises of the euro testify—first in Greece, now Italy. While the eurozone will continue to muddle through, the “ever closer union” of the EU as a whole is receding as we speak.

START WITH LEADERSHIP. The “engine” of integration has always been the Franco-German “couple.” This marriage has never been bliss incarnate; today it yokes two governments at odds with each other and their electorates.

Who leads and who follows are the questions that govern all politics. For a few years, Germany’s Angela Merkel was feted as uncrowned empress of Europe. Now she is on the way out, paying the price of opening Germany’s gates to a million-plus Mideast refugees in 2015–16.

As Merkel stumbled, France’s Emmanuel Macron stepped up in a blaze of glamour. His rhetoric was as bold as his ambitions were grandiose. Elected in a landslide, he would make France great again by recasting it and grabbing the helm of the EU.

The nakedness of the new emperor, now in his second year, is visible to all. Like so many French governments before him, his was denuded in the streets of Paris by the usual suspects of French “expressive politics.” The “Yellow Vests” were set off late last year by his “green” fuel tax. In truth, they went to war against “Macronism”—the attempt to loosen up rigid labor markets and fracture ancient group privileges.

It was déjà vu all over again—street vs. state. Within three weeks, the government buckled, as it has done so often in the past when fishermen, truckers, farmers, or students went on strike. So the government “postponed” the tax by six months. Having shown their clout, the protestors kept exacting more concessions. Say au revoir to reform and rejuvenation à la Macron.

Merkel was not undone in the streets, but at the ballot box. In the fall, her ruling Christian Democrats were trounced in two critical state elections, while the “Alternative for Germany,” an anti-immigrant upstart on the far right, improved its showing by up to 10 points.

In the national polls, Merkel’s Christian Democrats were down to 29 percent at the beginning of 2019, a deadly drop from the mid-forties of the past. Reading the handwriting, Merkel beat a tactical retreat, resigning as head of her party. In December, the convention replaced her with Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a Merkel protégé hailing from the tiny state of the Saarland, where she had served as prime minister. A Maggie Thatcher she is not.

It was an orderly transition, but Merkel may not last to the end of her term in 2021. Either way, say auf Wiedersehen to the legendary stability of Germany, which has gone through only eight chancellors while Italy has burned through 65 governments since the end of World War II.

For decades, Germany was essentially ruled by the center-right and the center-left. The Christian Democrats and Social Democrats either alternated in power or governed in tandem, as they have been during the past nine years. This duopoly is history. Long gone are the balmy days when these two together netted 80 percent of the ballots. If there were a general election today, polls say, they would haul in 43 percent. Their “grand coalition” has shrunk to a “petty coalition.” While the Social Democrats, as elsewhere in Europe, totter on the brink of oblivion, the system has splintered into six parties, two of which represent the radical left and right. Look forward to shaky coalitions and shorter-lived governments in a country that used to be Europe’s rock of ages.

So the Franco-German “couple” is walking on crutches. Vying for leadership, they have never agreed on the what and how of “ever closer union.” Emerging from centuries of absolutist rule, the French have become wedded to the all-providing state. They distrust the free market and look to the government for succor.
and shelter. This is why the Yellow Vests cut Macron down to size, clamoring for more spending, shorter work weeks, and higher wages. Across the Rhine, the Germans hearken back to the Holy Roman Empire, where power was spread across myriad kingdoms, cities, and duchies. Especially after 12 years of Nazi totalitarianism, Germans have come to cling to federalism and states’ rights, be it in Europe or at home. Decentralization is as German as Volkswagen and bratwurst. France remains the bastion of centralism.

Macron wants a European budget and a European finance minister to spread the wealth from rich Germany to the stagnating South. With their balanced budget, the Germans naturally insist on fiscal rigor, pushing the members of “Club Med” to get their house in order. This tug-of-war between the (Protestant) North and the (Catholic) South has always bedeviled the EU, mimicking the religious divides of the Thirty Years’ War in the 17th century. Today, this cleavage is just one among many threats to “ever closer union.” As the world is muscling in, the EU is drifting apart.

**BREXIT IS THE MOST BLATANT symptom of Eurofatigue.** The United Kingdom would rather face not-so-splendid isolation than submit to Brussels, and damn the gargantuan costs of defection. For the UK it is not “ever closer,” but simply “no union.”

Meanwhile, Poland and Hungary are marching to the beat of authoritarian nationalism. They will gladly take the goodies—billions in subsidies—from Brussels but refuse to obey its dictates of liberal-democratic virtue.

Italy is in a class of its own. In a historical first, it has voted right-wing and left-wing populists into power. Hostile brothers, the League and the Five Stars are held in harness by “Italy first” and anti-EU resentment. If they don’t shrink the national debt, the eurozone’s largest as a fraction of the GDP, the endless Greek euro crisis will look like a hiccup. With its tiny economy, Greece can be saved. Italy, Europe’s fourth-largest, cannot.

Finally, there is the latter-day “Hanseatic League” that the Dutch are harnessing against the French, now that their natural ally Britain is absconding. Informal members are the Scandinavians, the Baltics, and Ireland. These are fiscally conservative and highly competitive economies. Germany is a silent partner because it is loath to challenge France directly.

So much for the rifts inside. Now look at the wider world where history has not ended. Geopolitics and geo-economics are back. While Russia grabs land, China’s Belt and Road across Asia and into Europe. In the tariff wars, President Trump deploys raw power to change the terms of trade in America’s favor. His contempt for Europe, especially for Angela Merkel, is boundless. For him, Europe is a fat mouse too timid even to roar.

The U.S., China, and Russia are rearming as they stake out spheres of influence. Where does that leave those 450 million post-Brexit Europeans with the world’s second-largest GDP? The 21st century does not favor this mighty “civilian power.” Its best weapons, such as commerce, friendly persuasion, and institutionalized conflict resolution, are being blunted. For all the breathtaking advances of our time, the new arena of world politics looks more like the 18th and 19th centuries than the second half of the 20th, the Golden Age of the West.

**ARMED FORCES ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT INFLUENCE.** Economic strength trades at a discount. Unless there is a mailed fist beneath the white glove of diplomacy, states will not excel at power politics. Nor will the EU, and then for reasons of psychology rather than lack of clout. Preceded by million-fold slaughter in two world wars, 70 years under the strategic umbrella of the U.S. have set in motion an unprecedented cultural transformation.

Once the Europeans were a race of warriors who conquered the four corners of the world. But the million-fold slaughter that almost led to Europe’s suicide in the 20th century, not to speak of the industrial annihilation of Jews and other “subhumans,” may have cracked its collective soul. The spirit of “Never again!”
has overwhelmed the quest for booty, glory, and dominion. Heroism is out, discretion and pacificity are the better part of valor—and far less costly to boot.

Maybe Tocqueville was right when he attributed to bourgeois society “that coolness of understanding that renders men comparatively insensible to the violent and poetical excitement of arms [and] quenches the military spirit.” It is a “constant rule that among civilized nations the warlike passions will become more rare and less intense in proportion as social conditions are more equal.” The sage was writing about America, but his prediction fits Western Europe to a T.

The signs abound. You have to look hard for oversized national flags fluttering above gas stations in Europe as they do in the U.S. Once an officer's career was the quickest way to status and advancement in Europe. Today, the military enjoys about as much prestige as the post office. Soldiering is a job, not a national calling. Only France and Britain boast remnants of an ancient warrior culture. Its values—honor, duty, self-sacrifice—have dwindled in favor of civilian virtues like cooperation and compromise.

How to re-establish moral worth in the face of an unspeakable past—conquest, colonialism, and exploitation, as the catechism of correctness has it? Europe draws righteousness from its new incarnation as a moral superpower that will study war no more. Setting an example as “light unto the nations,” it will teach the world the wisdom of accommodation and rules-bound intercourse and so transmute strife into win-win for all. That’s what “civilian powers” do best; this is where the EU’s great comparative advantage pays off most. Clausewitz, who preached the twinship of force and diplomacy, doesn’t live here anymore.

For decades, acting (and orating) in this manner was a marvelous business model, keeping Europe out of harm's way and filling its coffers. Today, the model is losing its luster because the cultural transformation depended on a reliable American security guarantee. That pillar is not so sturdy now. As Angela Merkel puts it in the age of Trump, “we have to go some way toward taking our destiny into our own hands.”

Well spoken. Yet Europe’s tragedy is the gulf between fabulous wealth and feeble will, between its glorious past and a future now dimmed by the return of power politics. The new threats are devaluing the EU’s abundant civilian assets: trade and investment, suasion and cooption. In the benign setting of yore, the Union grew from six to 28 nations. But it would take a “United States of Europe” to play into the great-power league, where force is the ultimate currency of clout.

To make Europe great again, the post-Brexit 27 would have to coalesce into a single state with a strong executive characterized by “decision, activity, secrecy and dispatch,” as Alexander Hamilton famously argued in the Federalist Papers. Alas, with their national histories dating back to the days of Rome, the EU 27 will not replicate the fusion of America’s 13 colonies in our lifetime.

Time is not on their side, not with Vladimir Putin pressing in and Trump threatening to move out. So it will help to buy some insurance by arming and training a credible force embedded in NATO, history’s oldest alliance of free nations. Why NATO? Cold-eyed analysis would impress on both Americans and Europeans what a good deal the alliance has been.

For the Europeans, one big American umbrella is more reliable than lots of little European ones while a single European army remains a beautiful dream. For the United States, it is all about being there. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, whose 70th birthday is coming up this fall, has spared the U.S. a remake of World Wars I and II, when it first hung back and then had to pay with hundreds of thousands of fallen to restore the balance. Staying in Europe after 1945 was a wondrous blessing; not a single shot was fired in Europe during the Cold War. It is always more economical to be in place than to have to fight your way back in. Try now to dislodge the Russians from Syria.

The point is not to coddle Europe, but to stress America’s well-considered interests. Squeezed by Russia and China, the U.S. would not want to ditch Europe, not with its half a billion people and the world’s second-largest GDP. Even the greatest of powers will not thrive behind the walls of Fortress America. Just like nature, international politics abhors a vacuum, and those who wish the U.S. ill will be only too happy to fill it.

The U.S. would not be doing the Europeans a favor by continuing to extend a credible guarantee. It would be doing what interest and prudence demand in a world where Russia and China want to make America small again. Without its older European cousins, the U.S. would be a lonely giant with a limp. To let go of America’s largest strategic asset would be an act of folly that would not even play in the long term in Trump’s red-state redoubt.8
The Attack on Luck

How social-justice theory aims to control everything, including that which cannot be controlled

By Noah Rothman

In 2018, Arizona State University became the subject of a critical New York Times article following the school’s decision to establish a program for the study of “political economy and moral science.” Designed to focus on under-taught works such as Adam Smith’s economic philosophy and The Federalist Papers, the program came under fire because it was “too heavily focused on white male thinkers from the United States and Europe.”

This kind of racial reductionism is common in academia. In 2017, students at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, bent on “decolonizing” the syllabus and “address[ing] the structural and epistemological legacy of colonialism,” demanded that thinkers such as Plato, Descartes, and Kant give way, for the most part, to non-Western philosophers. If white European philosophers must be studied, let it be from “a critical standpoint.”

At first glance, it is not unreasonable for students who want to immerse themselves in non-Western cultures to maximize every opportunity to do precisely that, even if it means relegating the giants of European philosophical thought to the footnotes. But that is not how philosophy works. Its thinkers are interdependent, each relating to the others. There can be no comprehensive study of Kant without the study of his contemporary David Hume. Nor can Descartes be comprehended without understanding Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates.

The idea that Western and non-Western philosophy can be entirely compartmentalized is a product of ignorance. Some of the most influential works of medieval Islamic philosophy, for example, were composed in Spain—a nation that engaged in a fair bit of colonizing long after its Islamic influences had been integrated into Iberian society. Those Islamic philosophers, heavily influenced by their classical predecessors, in turn had a profound effect on the philosophical minds that came after them. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza set Europe on a course toward the Enlightenment, but he was also a dark-skinned Sephardic Jew from Portugal. Spinoza’s works are, however, unlikely to appear on the preferred reading list of London’s irate anti-colonial student activists. Their objections are less a matter of geography or ethnicity than a self-referential preconception about what they believe ought to be considered white European thought.

An item posted on the website Accredited Times praising the anti-white philosophy campaign asserts that our own age, graced by the philosophy of the

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Social-justice activists don’t know what they don’t know, but they also don’t seem to care that they don’t know it. They are not familiar with the Western philosophy they claim to resent.

great hip-hop artists, is “far superior” to that of the ancient Greeks. “When modern geniuses like Kanye West and Dr. Dre are still very much alive,” writes a self-described “transpecies activist, new age spiritual guru, and chief diversity coordinator,” “it is nothing short of perverse that our youth are forced to study philosophy from over two thousand years ago.”

These social-justice activists don’t know what they don’t know, but they also don’t seem to care that they don’t know it. They are not familiar with the Western philosophy they claim to resent. They don’t appear to know much about philosophy in general—neither the philosophy of others nor even their own. The pursuit of social justice is rich with history. It’s a savage irony that since the philosophical minds who gave birth to the concept of social justice were, by and large, white males, they would be spurned by their disciples.

Aristotle was among the first Western philosophers to examine the nature of justice—who should enjoy its benefits and how inequality results in or exacerbates injustices. If justice is viewed as a commodity, Aristotle thought, it should be equitably distributed across a population. Because all commodities are finite, a happy medium lies somewhere between getting more than your fair share and not getting enough.

Aristotle saw justice in terms familiar to future generations of redistributionists, even Karl Marx. If a society is possessed of only a handful of unique musical instruments, for example, Aristotle thought that they should be distributed to those who can play them best, giving society the maximum benefit from their use. This might seem a reasonable judgment if you don’t consider some of the more intangible virtues we prize now, such as dignity, property rights, and enfranchisement.

Aristotle endorsed equality, but not as we understand it today. He took for granted slavery and the inferiority of women. In fact, Aristotle saw the human condition as suited to social stratification. His concept of justice exemplifies a problem with which all of his successors would struggle. If justice is a virtue, it’s a strange one. It is not doled out by the charitable, and its recipients are not obliged to be grateful upon its delivery. If justice is giving each man his “due,” then those who are owed justice may seize it—by force, if necessary. But who determines what is “due” to someone?

Aristotle’s descendants were not as comfortable as he was with a stratified society. Subsequent thinkers including Rousseau, Hegel, and eventually Marx all took a stab at understanding and addressing the causes of social inequality. Many philosophers of justice during the Enlightenment focused on the establishment of just institutions. With the right social mechanisms, they reasoned, inequality will take care of itself.

This was not sufficient for John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher of our time. At Harvard, he built a theory of social justice that animates its activists today, many of whom have probably never read a single word of his magnum opus, A Theory of Justice.

How do you create a just institution? Rawls prescribes what he calls the “veil of ignorance,” according to which justice is “redistributed” by those who have no idea who the lucky and unlucky recipients will be. The veil ensures that the distributors of justice cannot know the class, abilities, tastes, physical characteristics, or morality of the people who will benefit from their actions. As much as these distributors of justice might want to bestow advantages on themselves or their particular tribe, they are blinded by the veil. Their adversaries might end up being the beneficiaries of their unfair distribution of social goods as much as their allies will.

Therefore, the operator behind the veil will choose the fairest distribution possible—to make sure his own people are not disadvantaged by the system. No one should enjoy an unearned advantage in a just society, Rawls theorizes, and the veil eliminates that temptation. Rawls contends that this is the place from which any just society must begin.

“Activists, social workers, and policymakers may have absorbed only secondhand versions of Rawls,” the sociologist Carl Bankston says. “Nevertheless, social justice advocates in general sound quite Rawlsian.” He notes, however, that “seeing people as positions rather than as individuals implicitly reduces them to categories.” Bankston observes that Rawlsian
thought leads to the division of society based on perceived levels of “victimization or oppression.”

Here is where Rawls’s veil falters somewhat for those seeking social justice in the here and now. Supreme Court decisions such as Brown v. Board of Education, which desegregated public schools, and Loving v. Virginia, which struck down bans on interracial marriage, could not ignore the identities of those who suffered discrimination and disenfranchisement. The policymakers who crafted the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts knew full well which groups were being persecuted and who was doing the persecuting. In these cases, applying the veil to the redistribution of justice, both social and economic, would have been both counterproductive and morally obtuse.

This is indeed a key weakness of Rawls’s unworldliness. His thought experiment about the veil of ignorance is exactly that, an experiment, and that could apply only in a world in which everyone agreed that it was the only just system. And besides that, Rawls’s conception of the ideal just society is itself problematic, argued his Harvard colleague Robert Nozick in 1974’s Anarchy, State, and Utopia.

Resources are not, Nozick wrote, the product of divine providence. All goods that exist today were crafted, produced, extracted, or designed by the hands of man. Insofar as someone has secured his resources legitimately, he has every right to them. The Rawlsian idea that resources—both tangible and intangible—should be distributed independently of the personal investment that brought them into existence has been tried in the Communist world. Nozick observed that conditions in Marxist societies were not only objectively unjust but also wildly economically inefficient.

While Nozick criticized Rawlsian philosophy for its impracticality, the economist Friedrich A. Hayek savaged its immorality in The Mirage of Social Justice, the second volume of his three-volume philosophical work, Law, Legislation, and Liberty. A passionate critic of redistribution, Hayek had no use for “social” anything. Calling it “a weasel word” that “wholly destroys” the meaning of whatever it happens to modify, Hayek deemed social justice among the worst of the lot of 160-odd “social” somethings.

“Everybody talks about social justice, but if you press people to explain to you what they mean by social justice...nobody knows,” Hayek told William F. Buckley Jr. on Firing Line in 1977. He dismissed the expression as “empty and meaningless,” “a quasi-religious belief with no content whatsoever,” having the potential to lead to “the destruction of the indispensable environment in which the traditional moral values alone can flourish, namely personal freedom.” It is an “intellectually disreputable” idea, which carries with it “the mark of demagoguery and cheap journalism, which responsible thinkers ought to be ashamed to use because, once its vacuity is recognized, its use is dishonest.” He was not a fan.

Hayek’s principal objection to social justice was that it distorts the marketplace, which he viewed as the most powerful engine of human potential and happiness. “Few circumstances will do more to make a person energetic and efficient than the belief that it depends chiefly on him whether he will reach the goals he has set himself,” Hayek contended. He reasoned, therefore, that social justice is an illusion.

Rawls’s idea of a just institution is a fallacy, Hayek declared. The minute that an institution starts redistributing society’s goods, it becomes unjust. The more a set of institutions commits itself to addressing inequalities, the more inequalities it causes: “This would go on until government literally controlled every circumstance which could affect any person’s well-being.” No one can depend on anyone but himself to secure his maximum economic benefit. To give in to the temptations of distributive justice is to empower the state, invite collectivism, socialism, and ultimately tyranny.

Social justice is “a demand that the state should treat different people differently in order to place them in the same position,” Hayek told Buckley. “Making people equal—a goal of governmental policy—would force government to treat people very unequally, indeed.”

Hayek did not see the state as a purely oppressive institution, nor did he resent basic welfare programs such as social safety nets or public education. The libertarian dogmatist Ayn Rand described him as “an example of our most pernicious enemy” because of his willingness to compromise with the demands of the modern liberal state and its voters. Hayek did, however, understand that Rawlsian ideals break

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In truth, social-justice advocates aren’t pure Rawlsian theorists, but they are not doctrinal Marxists either. They’re certainly not libertarians. So what are they?

down when they are applied in the real world. Men are fallible, advantage-seeking political animals, a truth that cannot be theorized away. The veil as Rawls envisioned it is an entirely theoretical construct that denies essential human nature.

Though they may be loath to admit it, social-justice advocates agree with Hayek on one core point: Perfect equality isn’t just unattainable, it’s undesirable. Like society’s tangible goods, intangible goods such as justice simply cannot be doled out from behind a veil of ignorance without perpetuating the very injustices we are trying to rectify. True justice, social-justice advocates argue, requires a social reversal. Oppressors must be subjugated and the subjugated must be lifted up. The veil would prevent a just society from achieving that objective.

Modern social-justice advocates have no interest in a color-blind society. Nor would they accept the notion that just institutions can be trusted to maximize collective benefit. They are suspicious of institutions in general, in fact, since those institutions are invariably the flawed inventions of corruptible men. They are unconvinced that perfect equality is desirable, because such a naive ideal ignores historical injustices. We must all bear burdens that are passed on to us at birth by our parents. These are obligations we cannot shrug off, no matter how hard we try.

In truth, social-justice advocates aren’t pure Rawlsian theorists, but they are not doctrinal Marxists either. They’re certainly not libertarians. So what are they? Their theory of justice is rooted in a more subjective notion—a hatred of luck.

Can institutions be made morally perfect? Can mankind? The answer is, alas, no. So the social-justice movement’s intellectual class has largely concluded that the pursuit of pure equality is not just a waste of time, it’s ethically flawed.

These theorists are content to use the noble idea of equality as a starting point, but they veer off the paths forged by Aristotle, Hume, and Rawls when individual actions or circumstances should preclude one person from receiving the same justice as another who is more deserving. How can it be just for people to enjoy the benefits or suffer the burdens associated with the conditions into which they were born? Are the less fortunate and the historically “privileged” truly equivalent? If we treated them equally, is that justice? Or does justice require confiscating benefits, perceived to be unearned, from some to give to others?

Andrew Lister, a lecturer at Oxford University’s Centre for the Study of Social Justice, expands on the notion that true distributive justice may have to account for the luck of the draw:

The rationale for focusing on social positions is that people will be born into different starting points in life, which make it more or less likely that they will be able to succeed. People are born with different levels of innate talent. And assuming that liberty must permit private childrearing in some form, we will never have perfect equality of opportunity. Moreover, even if there were perfectly fair equality of opportunity and no differences in levels of innate talent, any economic system involving the market will involve a substantial element of luck. People who are willing to play by the rules will suffer unmerited failure; others less meritorious will win success. . . . Since everyone depends on the cooperation of others, we ought to take advantage of this morally arbitrary luck to claim a greater share of what we produce together—not unless this inequality will make everyone better off.

This is an opinion that can be arrived at only by those with a powerful aversion to internalizing the lessons of history. Eliminating hereditary claims to title and nobility is one thing; neutralizing less tangible benefits based on a subjective assessment of “privilege” is something else. Social leveling is predicated on the sacrifice of individual liberty and potential. Indeed, as Lister concedes, “maximizing expected opportunity means being willing to accept that some may have very small chances in life in order that others who have already greater chances can have greater chances still.”

For the social-justice left, that is an unacceptable concession. Theirs is a crusade against “brute luck.” Those who believe in this philosophy and are
familiar with the literature on the matter call themselves “luck egalitarians.” Natural talent, opportunity, or even personal tastes—these are disparate circumstances that must be corrected through social leveling.

“The aim of justice as equality is to eliminate so far as it is possible the impact on people’s lives of bad luck that falls on them through no fault or choice of their own,” writes Richard Arneson of the University of California at San Diego. As he and other critics of luck egalitarianism point out, this kind of forced leveling only makes people bitter, ungovernable, and unproductive. These circumspect critics of luck call themselves “rational egalitarians.”

The Spanish academic Anca Gheaus tries to smooth over these divisions by identifying how social goods can be distributed in a way that doesn’t make the public want to rise up in violent revolution: “To promote equality of status, we could eliminate (especially early) school selection based on merit and de-emphasize quantitative evaluation of pupils and exams. To promote equality of power and inclusion we can, for instance, plan towns having in mind the goal of racial integration or introduce workplace democracy.” This is the fatal conceit of the haughty technocrat.

Gheaus has inadvertently allowed the social-justice mask to fall. Believers in her particular form of social justice see society not as an infinitely complex set of interactions and traditions shaped by trial and error over generations but as one big problem to fix. What’s more, they think they are sharp enough to fix it. If only they had the power to remake the world in their own image, this would be a just society at long last. This kind of hubris inevitably gives way to power hunger.

The pursuit of a purely just, rational, and equal society has preoccupied philosophical minds for millennia despite the impossibility of ever achieving such a thing. By defining justice as a tangible and therefore finite good, social-justice advocates are trapping themselves in a constricted and ultimately doomed paradigm.
The Case for Growth

Why the right’s attack is wrong

By James Pethokoukis

ORDON GEKKO MISSED the mark with his famous Wall Street monologue about American capitalism. It is not greed but economic growth that is, for lack of a better word, good. Growth is right. Growth works. Growth clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Growth has marked the upward surge of mankind. And growth—you mark my words—will save that malfunctioning corporation called the USA.

This is probably pretty obvious to most Americans. Strong economic growth means more jobs and higher wages. Just take a look at the current expansion. It has been only moderate as far as the pace of growth, but it has been sustained. And month after month of a growing economy has brought down the unemployment rate to its lowest level since 1969, even as real wages continue to grow for all income levels.

That’s especially true for working-class Americans. The 3.5 percent unemployment rate for Americans with only a high-school diploma is the lowest since 2000. Indeed, despite all the debate about income inequality, earnings have been growing faster for those at the bottom than at the top.

Or look at it this way: In their research paper “Productivity and Pay: Is the Link Broken?” Harvard’s Anna Stansbury and Lawrence Summers find that higher productivity growth is associated with higher average and median compensation growth. The economists show that if productivity growth had been as fast from 1973 to 2016 as it was from 1949 to 1973—about twice as high—median and mean compensation would have been around 41 percent higher.

Yet a growing number of policymakers and pundits on the left and right are questioning the primacy of growth as the key objective of national economic policy. Democrats and progressives are focused on new policies to redistribute wealth, such as Medicare for all, a federal jobs guarantee, or a universal basic income. Meanwhile, Republicans and conservatives, grappling with a president who questions the value

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of free trade and immigration, have grown publicly skeptical of market capitalism. “The free market has been sorting it out for a while, and America has been losing,” said Vice President Mike Pence. And they have become skeptical of the core goal of increasing economic growth.

LEADING THE CHARGE among the wonks is Oren Cass, a Manhattan Institute scholar and former policy director for the 2012 Mitt Romney presidential campaign. In his new book, *The Once and Future Worker*, Cass writes that although “economic growth and rising material living standards are laudable goals ... they by no means guarantee the health of a labor market that will meet society’s long-term needs.”

Growth skeptics’ criticisms range from the ahistorical to the utopian. Of course, a fast-rising tide of economic growth does not guarantee that all boats will rise at the same pace or at a pace that society deems sufficient. “Guarantee,” after all, is a strong word. Depending on the strength one attributes to it, it’s possible nothing can “guarantee” the outcome that some growth critics want: all winners, no losers, no trade-offs, no disruption. But if by “guarantee” we don’t mean “ensure with ironclad certainty” but only “approximate more closely than any available alternative,” then economic growth remains society’s best bet. Indeed, this very urge to undervalue growth’s benefits is the surest sign that growth in America has become a victim of its own success.

G.K. Chesterton famously noted how modern types of reformers see institutions or practices and think, “I don’t see the use of this; let us clear it away.” To which the wise reply, “If you don’t see the use of it, I certainly won’t let you clear it away.” Institutions and policies that endure decade after decade often serve a useful purpose even if that purpose isn’t immediately apparent, and we should be cautious before shrugging them off as unimportant. Our growth-oriented economic policy is a perfect example. It brings tremendous benefits, yet we now risk taking it for granted.

And what an odd time to question the benefits. The Obama administration was much derided for its apparently self-serving claim, made in the 2013 Economic Report of the President, “that in the 21st Century, real GDP growth in the United States is likely to be permanently slower than it was in earlier eras.” But it was a perfectly reasonable baseline forecast that continues to reflect the economic consensus from Wall Street to Washington. For instance: The Federal Reserve’s long-term, real GDP forecast stands at 1.8 percent, about half the average pace from 1947 to the start of the Great Recession. And even that reduced pace of growth seems a tad too optimistic for JPMorgan, which pegs the economy’s long-term growth potential at 1.5 percent.

There are good reasons that the experts seem so gloomy. The most important—and, perhaps, most inescapable—is demographics. The aging of the labor force, lower birth rates, and a slowing rate of immigration suggest a slowdown in the growth of the American labor force to around 0.5 percent annually going forward—as compared with roughly 2 percent in the 1960s and 1970s. The U.S. economy expanded at a 4.1 percent annual pace during the ’60s—a decade that today’s nationalist populists look back on with great nostalgia. But growth would have been less than 3 percent if the labor force had been growingly as slowly back then as it is currently.

The other big obstacle to faster growth is weak productivity, which downshifted just before the Great Recession and has yet to rebound. For the American economy to grow as fast in the future as it has overall since World War II, output per worker will need to rise sharply. Indeed, that is a big goal of the 2017 Republican-pushed corporate tax cuts. They are supposed to increase business investment and eventually productivity growth. But there are no signs that either is happening yet, much to the dismay of many conservative economists. The only other hope lies beyond Washington’s tinkering: The private sector continues to innovate. Maybe Silicon Valley will eventually come to the rescue, as innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence and robotics eventually spreads throughout the non-tech economy. The history of radical technological advances, such as electrification, suggest that it can take some time before businesses figure out how to effectively employ them.

It can be easy to dismiss all this talk of growth rates as the abstract muttering of economists far removed from the everyday concerns of the average American. As a corrective, George Mason economist Tyler Cowen poses a useful thought experiment in
It wasn’t too much globalization and economic openness that undermined large swaths of the manufacturing economy, but too little.

writes: “Imagine the world in the year 1900. There was no air travel, no antibiotics, no iPhone, no Amazon Prime, no modern high school and no air conditioning....Anyone who played down growth a century ago wouldn’t have known they were arguing against any of these things, because none of these growth-enabled features of modern life had been invented yet. But they would have been putting the existence of all these at risk by stalling, even marginally, the economic engine that allowed for their creation.”

Sustained and solid growth is what makes these advances possible and is what separates the median American today from the median residents of the world’s developing economies. Sacrificing a tenth of a percentage point here and two tenths there to, say, protect favored industries from foreign competition or levy punitive taxes on obscenely rich entrepreneurs may seem like a worthwhile trade-off in the moment. But because of how growth compounds over time, in the long term such trade-offs aren’t just unappealing but inexplicable. As the Nobel laureate in economics Robert Lucas wrote, “once one starts to think about [exponential growth], it is hard to think about anything else.” Marginally slowing down economic growth to achieve other policy goals might cause little harm to us, but it seems both less fair and less wise when the welfare of ensuing generations are accounted for. In Strain’s words: “What in the world of tomorrow doesn’t yet exist? We need growth in order to find the answer, both for ourselves, and for posterity.”

It is strange that intellectuals are dismissing the importance of economic growth at just the point when it is becoming harder to generate—and doubly weird after a long stretch of sluggish growth that has almost certainly played a role in the surge of populist politicians such as President Trump. And these populist leaders are pushing the sorts of policies that make a future of slow growth even more likely.

Trump looks back to the immediate decades after World War II as the golden age of the American economy. His presidential campaign, for instance, made a point of promising the return of mass employment in the industrial-age industries of steel and coal. Cass, too, has pointed to those decades as an alternate model of economic growth. As he said during a recent think-tank event: “The period of time when productivity growth was really booming most in the American economy was a time when tax rates were much higher, immigration rates were much lower, there was virtually no international trade by the standards of the 1920s or today, and there was a much smaller or nonexistent safety net. The idea that what we currently call the pro-growth agenda is actually what has aligned with high growth isn’t true.”

That is a wrong-headed interpretation of economic history. While it is true that the so-called golden-age era is known for fast economic and productivity growth, economists generally do not credit the lack of trade or immigration. Rather, notes the Congressional Budget Office in a review of research literature on the subject, “the golden age may be more accurately interpreted as the full final exploitation of an earlier burst of innovations through electrification, suburbanization, completion and increasing exploitation of the highway system, and production of consumer appliances.” In other words, huge technological advances in the 1920s and 1930s generated benefits for decades.

Unfortunately, those productivity gains, along with America’s industrial superiority over its war-ravaged competitors, have created a myth about the postwar American economy—a myth that populists continue to spread. Yet Fortress America entered the 1970s ill prepared for the inevitable global competition as the rest of the world’s advanced economies finally recovered.

Both Trump and Cass, therefore, have it backward. It wasn’t too much globalization and economic openness that undermined large swaths of the manufacturing economy, but too little. As Adrian Wooldridge of the Economist and former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan write in Capitalism in America: “The 1970s was the decade when Americans finally had to grapple with the fact that it was losing its leadership in an ever widening range of industries. Though the best American companies such as General Electric...
and Pfizer powered ahead, a striking number treaded water. They had succeeded during the long postwar boom not because they had any particular merit, but because Europe and Japan were still recovering from World War Two and they collapsed at the first sniff of competition.

The last thing the American economy needs today is a reduction in competitive intensity, whether achieved by shielding industries with tariffs or keeping out the immigrants that help grow the workforce and provide expertise to key industries, especially technology. Nearly half of our “unicorn companies,” another name for U.S. start-ups worth over $1 billion, were founded by immigrants. Immigrant scientists and entrepreneurs play a disproportionate role in driving the tech progress necessary for sustained productivity growth. Forty percent of Fortune 500 companies have a first- or second-generation immigrant founder. Immigrants may compete with other Americans, but they also employ them.

The critics of a growth-above-all approach might grant that no other national policy is better at generating material prosperity. But, they say, life requires more than mere materialism. We crave community, beauty, and a certain degree of stability. It is this objection that Harvard’s Benjamin Friedman sought to address in his 2006 book, The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth. True, capitalism and the creative destruction that drive it can disrupt traditional cultures or degrade the environment. And from the Old Testament to the present, men have fretted over usury’s effects on one’s soul (today we might say finance’s effects on one’s morals). But growth doesn’t only erode individual and societal morality. Besides improving material conditions, growth improves moral ones as well.

Friedman notes how sustained growth “shapes the social, political and, ultimately, the moral character of a people” and “more often than not fosters greater opportunity, tolerance of diversity, social mobility, commitment to fairness, and dedication to democracy.” Slow growth, on the other hand, leads to ugly consequences, especially if voters begin to feel it is inevitable. In times of stagnation, economic policy tilts toward dividing up a fixed pie, rather than enlarging everyone’s share. It could mean a society that is less willing to entertain the benefits of international trade, more hostile toward immigration and immigrants, and more comfortable with regulating business.

In fact, “could” is putting it mildly. The tariffs, legislative efforts to reduce immigration, and frequent threats to regulate America’s most successful companies, such as Google and Amazon, already show some of the consequences of the sluggish recovery from the Great Recession—and this from what is supposed to be America’s pro-growth party.

Growth is, and remains, good. Growth is right, staving off a zero-sum politics defined more by group conflict than productive cooperation. Growth works, improving everyone’s standard of living, if not always equally, at least steadily. Growth clarifies, exposing business to competition and preventing industrial calcification. Growth signifies the evolutionary and upward surge of mankind, evident in everything from modern medicine to interstellar space travel.

And a policy geared toward increasing economic growth—pursued attentively and unapologetically—will save the United States of America. All other national economic strategies are but pale imitations.
The Bertie Factor

An affecting series of novels features an unlikely champion of maleness

By Charles Sykes

The war over boyness has been playing out for years, not merely on college campuses and workplaces, but also in elementary schools, where boys find themselves surrounded by trip wires of grievance, in a society where the rules seem to be fluid and the struggle decidedly one-sided.

This is Bertie Pollock's world. He is a precocious six-year-old of distinctive sweetness, thoughtfulness, honesty, and kindness, whose longing for a normal boyhood is more poignant than threatening. All of which makes him the unlikeliest of protagonists in our ongoing gender war.

"Boys have had it, Bertie," a six-year-old girl lectures him. "They're finished. There's no point in being a boy anymore. Everybody knows that."

Bertie's creator, Alexander McCall Smith, is best known for his No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, which is set in Botswana. But Smith's sharpest and most unexpected works are 12 novels (so far) set in his native Scotland that are an extended meditation on the themes of masculinity and freedom, in which the protagonist is not an action hero but rather a small boy.

The first in Smith's 44 Scotland Street series was published in 2005; the most recent, A Time of Love and Tartan, in 2017. The series portrays Bertie's struggle to free himself from his insufferable mother and her program of aggressive gender neutrality. Smith offers up a stinging takedown not merely of a style of parental hothousing, but of psychotherapy, feminism, the attack on masculinity, and social-justice hectoring.

All of that is personified in Bertie's mother, Irene, a bottomless well of politically correct attitudes and prejudices. She insists on imposing her worldview on everyone with whom she comes in contact, but most especially on poor Bertie, who simply wants to play with other boys, join the Boy Scouts, go camping and fishing, and someday perhaps get a Swiss Army knife.

If Smith had addressed the issues of gender head-on (like Jordan Peterson), he would undoubtedly have been anathematized. But by making Bertie Pollock his unlikely hero, Smith has been able to insinuate his pointed critique into the popular culture with unexpected results. In the hands of another author, this might have come off as hostile to women, but Smith's sympathy for his female characters is palpable (his detective series centers on the formidable Precious Ramotswe, one of the great characters in contemporary crime fiction).

The astonishingly prolific Smith has published 97 novels for children and adults since 1980. Born in what is now Zimbabwe, he has served as a professor of medical law at universities from Botswana to Dublin. He is surprised that Bertie has "become so important a character," he has said. "I certainly did not imagine that he would acquire so many supporters—or sympathizers." Wherever
Bertie yearns desperately for the day when he will turn 18, an age of liberation when he will be free to wear kilts, have a pocket knife, and move from Edinburgh to Glasgow.

he goes, he has found that “people are more anxious about Bertie than they are about any of my other fictional characters. They want him to find freedom. They want him to escape.”

Irene is fascinated to the point of obsession by the works of progressive child psychologist Melanie Klein, and she has written an article for the journal *Progressive Motherhood* in which she sets out her objectives for what would become “the Bertie Project.”

For her, the Bertie Project was based on the notion of the malleability of masculine character. She wanted Bertie to be free of the stereotypes of gender. She wanted him to be in touch with his inner girl. She wanted him to view Swiss Army penknives as instruments of oppression.... The possession of a Swiss Army penknife was a statement proclaiming, I am a boy. Irene saw all that quite clearly, and she would not allow it. It was as simple as that.

His father, Stuart, is sympathetic with Bertie’s plight but largely ineffectual. And Irene is relentless and passionate in imposing her regime of psychotherapy, yoga classes, and lessons in conversational Italian and the saxophone.

Her plan for Bertie includes “a broad and fulfilling program of intellectual stimulation introducing him at a very early stage (four months) to the possibilities of theatre, music, and the plastic arts.” This begins when Bertie is in utero; as an infant, Irene plays him tapes of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. We are told, in fact, that Bertie had consumed “not only the complete works of Roald Dahl for children, but also half of Norman Lebrecht’s book on Mahler and almost seventy pages of Miranda Carter’s biography of the late Anthony Blunt.”

Bertie is also exposed to Freud’s account of Little Hans and the Wolf Man, “who struck Bertie as being an entirely reasonable boy, who had just as little need of analysis as he himself had.”

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Commentary
Milne “was the product of a typically repressed and authoritarian Edwardian household” and that Pooh is a battered teddy bear because “physical abuse at the hands of all-powerful adults was the lot of Edwardian children. The bear is now reduced to pathetic dependence on the boy, and must accept the boy’s authority in all things.” She insists that Bertie undergo psychotherapy with a quack named Dr. Fairbairn. After Irene gives birth to his baby brother, who is named Ulysses, Bertie notices something odd. “Mummy,’ he asks, “don’t you think that Ulysses looks a lot like Dr. Fairbairn. Haven’t you noticed? Do you think Dr. Fairbairn could be Ulysses’s daddy?”

All of this is merely background to Irene’s determination to “degender” Bertie by robbing him not only of his freedom but his identity as a boy.

When she says that she is keen “for him to be able to see the world through female eyes,” his father, Stuart, attempts to push back: “I’m surprised you don’t make him wear a dress…. Do you want him to grow up rejecting masculine identity?”

Irene regards the question as shallow and offensive. “But now that you ask,” she says, “the answer is: what is wrong with a rejection of masculinity? Is there anything intrinsically good in being masculine?” She is trying to make sure their son “grows up adapted to the gender-neutral world that is being constructed around us. That means that a lot of old-fashioned ideas are going to have to be scrapped.”

Irene forbids Bertie from using playgrounds and paints his bedroom “a reassuring pink.” Bertie is appalled, and when Irene tells him that he should feel lucky to have a space like this, he answers: “Other boys have different spaces. They have trains and things.”

But, Irene insists, they are not as lucky as he is because “we’re giving you something very different, Bertie. We’re giving you the gift of freedom from gender roles.” This does not feel like “freedom” in any sense that Bertie understands it. Nor does her denial of the objective reality of gender identity, which is the subtext of the war between Irene and Bertie.

In the 11th book in the series, Bertie Project, Smith has two characters, Patty and Elspeth, discuss the ongoing campaign against maleness.

Patty smiled, “Yes, boys are different. And men too.”

“Yet we’re expected to deny it. We’re so busy trying to promote the notion that there are no differences…”

Patty took this up. “Thereby ignoring the evidence of biology. Men and women are different—they just are…”

“And have you noticed something else, Patty? Have you noticed how people think it’s all right to run down men? To say that men are dim and insensitive? That women are far more competent at all sorts of things?…”

“Oh, I’ve noticed that,” said Patty. “People think they can say anything derogatory about men—things they’d never dare say about women—and rightly so. It’s called gender defamation…”


“All the things that used to happen to women,” murmured Patty.

In Smith’s work, there is usually some sort of sympathy or redemption for even his most flawed characters, but his treatment of Irene is a notable exception. Smith relentlessly satirizes her snobbery, smugness, casual bigotries, hypocrisies, and smothering tyranny over Bertie. Indeed, after years of browbeating, her long-suffering husband, Stuart, comes to a startling realization: Irene is not merely an overbearing mother and obnoxious ideologue; she is a mini-Mussolini.

That was what Irene stood for. She stood for intolerance and domination. She stood for those people—those nameless people, who would dictate to others. She was a tyrant, just as all those people who crushed others into silence were tyrants.

And then a terrible realization dawned on Stuart…. He was married to a fascist.

He felt immediately ashamed…. But it was true: Irene was a fascist. She wanted so many of the things that fascists wanted—the same powerful state, the same unanimity of opinion and purpose, the same imposition of

In Smith’s work, there is usually some sort of sympathy or redemption for even his most flawed characters, but his treatment of Irene is a notable exception.
Bertie wakes up filled with hope. But Irene insists on giving her son gender-neutral gifts. The first present she has picked out is a ‘Junior UN Peacekeeping kit.’

ideology, the same suppression of free debate that those grubby bullies wanted.

Inevitably, there is a crisis as Irene’s compulsive correctness clashes with Bertie’s aspirations, and it comes on Bertie’s long delayed seventh birthday (he remained six for a rather extended time in Smith’s series). Bertie wakes up filled with hope. He is not yet 18, when he will be able to free himself from his mother, but he thinks that maybe he’s old enough to finally get a fishing rod or a Swiss Army knife. But Irene insists on giving him gender-neutral gifts. The first present she has picked out is a “Junior UN Peacekeeping Kit.” The instruction book explains:

A fine gift for those who wish to avoid mili-
taristic play (Cowboys and Indians, soldiers, etc.) Children become UN peacekeepers with these handy blue UN armbands, pacification leaflets, and pretend maps. Hours of constructive fun for children aged 5 to 10. No small parts.

Bertie is polite.

“You see,” said Irene. “Jo can have all sorts of adventures helping people. Isn’t that nice, Bertie?” Bertie is again polite, but he “was thinking of where he could hide Jo so that nobody should see her. He was thinking about how he could cut her hair off so that she might pass for a boy doll, like Ken.” The humiliation is complete when his obnoxious schoolmates discover Jo.

Although Stuart cannot bring himself to stand up to Irene, he agrees to help Bertie throw the doll away in an act of male bonding and defiance. Together they toss it into the River Leith, only to have it retrieved by a dog. They then agree to donate the gender-neutral action figure to a charity shop, despite the fact that Jo has a canine tooth puncture where her mouth used to be.

For both Stuart and Bertie, it is a moment of empowerment. But their luck gets even better when Irene wins a contest to travel to Dubai, where after a series of misunderstandings she is mistaken for the wife of a Bedouin leader and ends up in a sheik’s harem in the desert and forced to remain for several weeks. Irene is unharmed and forms a book group, but her absence means liberation for seven-year-old Bertie.

He is able to eat pizza and watch television, and there is at least one rugby match in his future. He is also able to go camping with one of his new friends, which he regards as “good fortune of an utterly overwhelming nature.” And he is able to have a belated Irene-less birthday party, with boys and actual games. Instead of carrots and other mandated healthy foods, he has Italian sausages, haggis, smoked salmon, ice cream topped with chocolate sauce, and a “large sickly cake, dyed orange and green.”

Irene does eventually return, at least for a while. But for the first time, Bertie is free. At his party, his friend, the artist Angus Lord, reads him a poem about kindness, hope, courage, and Bertie’s deepest longing.

So what do I wish for you?
Freedom? I imagine
You know all about that
Even if so far you’ve had to contemplate it from a distance...

It’s a worthy dream for any boy.
The Glow-Worm

Churchill: Walking with Destiny
By Andrew Roberts
Viking, 1,152 pages

Reviewed by
John Steele Gordon

The catalog of the New York Public Library lists no fewer than 1,140 books under the subject heading “Winston Churchill.” Do we need another? If it’s a biography by Andrew Roberts using many hitherto unavailable sources (such as King George VI’s diary), the answer is an emphatic yes. Roberts, a Commentary contributor, is the best-selling author of numerous histories and biographies, including The Storm of War; Napoleon: a Life; and Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941–1945. Thus he was supremely qualified to write a life of the man who helped the world by standing up to Hitler when all seemed lost. And he has justified his qualifications with his wonderful, masterly Churchill: Walking with Destiny.

As Roberts makes clear in this well-rounded and by no means hagiographic biography, what is perhaps most remarkable about Churchill is that, had he never set foot in the House of Commons, he would still be remembered today more than 50 years after his death in 1965. For Churchill was far more than a politician, however great. Only two writers of nonfiction have ever won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Churchill is one of them. (Bertrand Russell is the other.) His four-volume biography of his ancestor the first duke of Marlborough is universally regarded as an unsurpassed masterpiece of the biographer’s art, and has been called “the greatest historical work of the 20th century.” In the course of his long life, Churchill wrote no fewer than 14 books, many of them multi-volume. Nearly all remain in print. In addition, he wrote many hundreds if not thousands of articles for newspapers and magazines and was one of the most highly paid journalists in the world.

Not the least of his literary gifts was his wit and talent for repartee, honed in the rough-and-tumble House of Commons. Churchill is among the few who have had books of quotations devoted solely to himself. Of course, like Mark Twain and Yogi Berra, there are a lot of famous quotes misattributed to Churchill, and Roberts faithfully points them out, to the reader’s disappointment.

While an aristocrat to his fingertips, Churchill was never in the least a snob and had a singular gift for friendship. He was notably pro-Semitic, with many close Jewish friends. He also had many friends in Britain’s homosexual community, including Eddie Marsh, who was his private secretary and close associate for decades. When Churchill first offered him the job, Marsh was hesitant and asked a...
Winston Churchill was born November 30, 1874, in the splendor of Blenheim Palace, the seat of the dukes of Marlborough. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was the younger son of the seventh duke. His mother was the famously beautiful Jennie Jerome, daughter of a New York financier. It was one of the earliest of the transatlantic marriages between British aristocrats and American wealth, and it profoundly affected Churchill's embrace of “the English-Speaking Peoples,” whose history would be his last major work, in four volumes.

Even by the standards of the Victorian upper class, Churchill's parents were neglectful. They seldom visited him at school, despite often piteous pleas from him to do so, and their infrequent letters to him were usually filled with criticism. It was his nanny, Elizabeth Everest, who gave him the unqualified love that all children need to grow up. When “Woom” died in 1895, Churchill paid for her gravestone and for the upkeep of her grave for the rest of his life. Personal loyalty was among his many great qualities.

Churchill's father thought his son was at best “second and third rate,” and would amount to nothing. To be sure, he had evidence, as Churchill's school grades were mediocre at best and he was nearly always in disciplinary trouble. But Churchill was a classic autodidact. He had little interest in mastering Latin verbs and got poor grades as a result (and his French was famously idiosyncratic). But he read voraciously in history, literature, and science. He also developed at school a memory of astonishing capacity that would serve him well in later life.

When a friend pointed out, in 1906, that Churchill had not read Keats's “Ode to a Nightingale,” the friend reported that “the next time I met him, he had learned not merely this, but all the odes of Keats by heart—and he recited them to me mercilessly from start to finish, sparing me not a syllable!”

Randolph's harsh predictions and aloofness instilled in Churchill a ferocious, lifelong need to impress him, even long after his father's death in 1895, but it did not give him any sense of inferiority. Indeed, he had no doubt whatever that he was destined for greatness, hence Robert's subtitle “Walking with Destiny.” “We are all worms,” Churchill told his close friend Violet Asquith, “but I do believe that I am a glow-worm.”

It took him three tries to get into Sandhurst, Britain's military academy, and he had to join the cavalry, rather than the more prestigious infantry, much to his father's disgust.

But out of Sandhurst, Churchill spent the next five years leading an adventurous life as both a war correspondent and soldier and writing three well-received books about campaigns he was on. He later recalled this period in My Early Life, a bestselling memoir and still highly readable today. He served in Cuba, the Northwest Frontier Province of India, Egypt, and the Sudan (where he took part in the last great cavalry charge in British history at the battle of Omdurman) and in South Africa during the Boer War. There he was captured by the Boers and put in a prisoner-of-war camp. He made a daring escape, and his newspaper dispatches about it made him famous at home.

His physical courage was always notable, as was his propensity for getting into accidents. He fell 30 feet out of a tree when at school, dislocated his shoulder docking at Bombay and causing permanent injury; survived a plane crash in 1919, and in 1931 was hit by a New York taxi, an accident he was lucky to survive. He was in the hospital for a week. Typically, he took advantage of the situation, writing an article, "My New York Misadventure," for which he was paid a princely £500 (about $35,000 in today's money).

In 1900, still only 25, Churchill was elected to Parliament as a Conservative. Except for a short period in the early 1920s, he would be a member for the rest of his life. But he didn't stay a Conservative for long. He crossed the floor in 1904 and became a Liberal.

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In 1900, still only 25, Churchill was elected to Parliament as a Conservative. Except for a short period in the early 1920s, he would be a member for the rest of his life. But he didn't stay a Conservative for long. Disagreeing with the party's economic and social policies, he crossed the floor in 1904 and became a Liberal. When the Liberal Party began to collapse in the early 1920s, Churchill returned to the Conservative Party. He noted that "anyone can rat, but it takes a certain ingenuity to re-rat."

In 1908 he married Clementine Hozier. It would be a happy mar-
riage that lasted 55 years and produced five children—four daughters (one of whom died at age three, to Churchill's great distress) and a son, Randolph, who would have a difficult relation with his parents (and of whom Roberts does not approve). The year they were wed was the first Churchill spent in the cabinet, the youngest member in more than 40 years.

The particulars of Churchill's political career, which was marked by many ups and downs, need not concern us here. What does concern us is his moral and intellectual courage in opposing, alone of all major British politicians, the policy of appeasing Hitler in the 1930s. He was out of the government for those years, and most people thought he was finished as a major figure in British politics.

But when Hitler proved Churchill right, he had to be brought back, as First Lord of the Admiralty and then, amid the military disasters of the spring of 1940, as prime minister. At last at No. 10, he used his extraordinary powers of oratory to rally the British nation to hold on. When, in 1941, Hitler attacked Russia and the United States entered the European conflict, he knew Britain was safe.

There have been few lives as long, momentous, and wide-ranging as that of Sir Winston Churchill, author, adventurer, orator, wit, painter, animal lover, friend, and politician. Andrew Roberts's masterful, supremely readable biography has a text 982 pages long. It could hardly have been shorter and told so extraordinary a story so well.

Thus, it brings joy to our hearts when a scholar traces the connections between our scribblings and high acts of state. In this spirit we can welcome Paving the Way for Reagan: The Influence of Conservative Media on US Foreign Policy, by the historian Laurence Jurdem.

Jurdem takes in view Commentary, National Review, and Human Events and recapitulates their stances from the mid-1960s until 1980 on the Vietnam War, détente, arms control, the anti-American turn of the UN, the Panama Canal Treaty, the struggle over Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, and the OPEC oil embargo, with cursory references to the odd domestic issue. He argues that these writings helped shape Reagan's final address to the nation's voters on the eve of the 1980 election. Invoking the editors of these three journals, Jurdem writes: “Watching Reagan [that] evening [they] believed that they saw the right man to deliver the script that could revive the fortunes of the nation. It was a script they knew well, because they had written it.”

To Jurdem's credit, his own ideological leanings, whatever they may be, do not reveal themselves except insofar as one might suppose that the choice of subject and its treatment in a mostly non-pejorative manner, imply a measure of sympathy. How large a measure is not clear. Disappointingly, however, his grasp of the events and debates of the time is not steady. The reader who lived through it will pause often trying to recognize them.

Joshua Muravchik is a long-time contributor to Commentary and the author of Heaven on Earth: The Rise, Fall, and Afterlife of Socialism (a new edition of the 2002 book) to be released by Encounter in April.

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Paving the Way for Reagan: The Influence of Conservative Media on US Foreign Policy
By Laurence Jurdem
University Press of Kentucky, 280 pages

Reviewed by Joshua Muravchik

LIKE MOST OTHER people, those of us who write for intellectual journals want to believe that what we do is important—even if the size of our readership is dwarfed by many outlets of popular culture. Much of contemporary exploration of ideas about the good, the just, and the practical occurs in the pages we fill. About this we are confident. But does it really matter? How, if at all, do our rarified debates affect the broader world? Occasionally, the evidence is obvious, as when Daniel Patrick Moynihan or Jeane Kirkpatrick is named to represent the United States before the United Nations on the strength of an essay in Commentary. But much of the time, we take it on faith that the space we inhabit is not a mere echo chamber.

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For example, he mentions the 1969 riots in Berkeley over the so-called People's Park, in which hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students and miscellaneous bohemians were confronted by police wielding batons and sometimes firing birdshot. After setting the scene, Jurdem offers only one quote, this from National Review: “For the first time the silent majority stood up.” It is hard to imagine that the author of this quote was referring to either the rioters or the police. So then to whom? Jurdem leaves us guessing.

With respect to the nuclear-arms-control talks, Jurdem writes, “The conservative publications contended that only by continued pressure throughout the bargaining process would the United States gain an advantage over the Soviet Union in the Cold War.” In truth, these publications objected to the terms of SALT I because it formally accorded the Soviet Union numerical superiority in nuclear missiles. The publications rallied around an amendment offered by Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson to the terms of ratification, which required that future agreements be shorn of this imbalance—not that they be tilted in America’s favor.

Jurdem writes that the so-called Team B created by the CIA in the 1970s to provide a second opinion about the Soviet military “painted a much more formidable picture of the Soviet nuclear arsenal than had previously been portrayed.” But the purpose of Team B was not to describe or weigh the Soviet arsenal, the composition of which was stipulated as part of the exercise—based on what our satellites and other instruments of espionage could observe. Rather, the task was to draw inferences about the strategic thinking of Soviet rulers that could be deduced from their arsenal. Rightly or wrongly, Team B concluded that our Soviet counterparts did not regard a war between the superpowers as “unthinkable,” as American leaders did.

And Jurdem several times misses the nuances of his subjects’ arguments. He says that Jeane Kirkpatrick’s 1979 Commentary essay, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” explained “how much more complicated it was to remove left-wing autocracies than right-wing ones, as the leftist principles were so deeply ingrained within the society.” While she did make the point that Communist regimes had not been overthrown, this, Kirkpatrick said, was due to their greater repressiveness, in part because their “principles,” far from being ingrained, were artificially grafted. Contrary to Jurdem’s understanding, she explicitly pointed out that traditional authoritarian regimes, i.e., most right-wing dictatorships, tended to be more congruent with societal traditions.

To take another example, citing a jeremiad in National Review against OPEC’s 1973 oil boycott, Jurdem explains that it “reflected the shortsighted conservative view that any nonwhite or non-Christian group of people was ignorant and inferior.” This remarkable accusation of racism and religious bigotry is evidenced not by any quote from the magazine itself but by a citation of an obscure and apparently hostile history of American conservatism published by an equally obscure British outlet with the earmarks of a vanity press.

One more example: Jurdem writes that “conservatives were discouraged by what they believed to be the Carter administration’s lackluster foreign policy.” “Discouraged”? “Lackluster”? Kirkpatrick accused Carter of favoring our enemies over our friends. Jackson said Carter’s policy amounted to “appeasement,” and Moynihan called it, at least in the UN, a “total and squalid failure.”

The most disappointing thing about Paving the Way for Reagan is not any particular misconstruction but its failure to capture the atmosphere of the time. The civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s brought America face to face with its own gravest sins. The shock profoundly influenced the attitudes of a younger generation that had no direct memory of the heroism of World War II. This was followed at once by, or rather overlapped with, a grinding war in Vietnam that claimed more than 50,000 U.S. lives in a lost cause. By the time the last helicopter lifted off the roof of our Saigon embassy, Americans were sick of foreign engagements, doubtful about the wisdom of trying to resist Communism, and generally down on their country.

Over the next half decade, the magazines Jurdem writes about, as well as a miscellany of other small publications, writers, thinkers, and political figures, generated a
Too Many Communists in the Kitchen

Making History Making Blintzes: How Two Red Diaper Babies Found Each Other and Discovered America
By Mickey Flacks and Dick Flacks
Rutgers University Press, 512 pages

Reviewed by Harvey Klehr

H IRTY YEARS AGO, Richard Flacks wrote Making History: The American Left and the American Mind. Flacks had been a leader of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a 1960s leftist activist organization that had folded almost 15 years earlier. He had helped to write SDS's 1962 Port Huron manifesto, a document widely credited with inaugurating the New Left. In my review of Making History for Commentary, I noted that Flacks had maintained his enthusiasm for participatory democracy, the Manifesto's guiding principle. An unabashed optimist, he dismissed the revival of conservatism in the 1980s as a mere symptom of “false consciousness,” the process, according to Marxists, by which the working class is deluded into supporting the ruling class. Flacks called on radicals to resist authority, focus on the everyday lives of Americans, and demand more democracy in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Reflecting the dominance of the American two-party system, he laid out a strategy to capture the Democratic Party and turn it into a progressive stronghold. To those not on the left at the time, it seemed an exercise in futility.

Well, Flacks is back. And, with some justification, he’s even more optimistic than before. In Making History Making Blintzes, Flacks, a retired sociology professor at University of California, Santa Barbara, and his wife, Mickey, argue that the selfish, individualistic business ethic of capitalism is in retreat in America and around the Western world. The title is intended to describe how to change society through local organizing and quotidian life, warning that without a focus on how people live, the organizations they create can atrophy or become ends in themselves. Flacks’s new book, unlike his earlier one, is frankly autobiographical and hopes to point the way forward by adducing the Flackses’ life stories.

Making History Making Blintzes is divided into three parts. The first recounts the authors’ Communist backgrounds and their disillusionment with the Communist Party USA. The second deals with their involvement in the early years of the New Left in Ann Arbor and Chicago and their unease with the drift of SDS. The final section is a triumphalist narrative of their efforts to build “socialism in one city”—Santa Barbara, California, where Dick taught for more than 30 years. Each author writes separate sections, although his is the most prominent voice.

Both Mickey and Dick Flacks were born into Communist families. Mickey’s mother was a fervent Bolshevik in 1917, and, even after accompanying her family to America in 1922, she toyed with returning to the USSR. In fact, she lived in Moscow with her husband and oldest son for nearly two years in the 1930s before going back to America. Even though she admitted late in life that she might have faced “difficulties” if she had remained in the Soviet Union, she apparently never abandoned her Communist faith. And her life revolved around Communist fraternal and social institutions. Dick’s parents were New York school teachers and assimilated Jews who were deeply involved in the Communist-dominated teachers’ union.

* The casual shortening is Flacks’s. In Making History, his first name appeared as Richard. In Making History Making Blintzes, it’s Dick.
Both Mickey and Dick joined Communist youth groups and attended Communist camps where the kids sang with Pete Seeger and idolized Paul Robeson. Growing up during the “Red Scare,” they felt alienated from an American society that was, as Mickey puts it, “capitalistic and corrupt, racist, anti-Semitic (or, if Jewish, self-hating), lowbrow, anti-intellectual, and generally and profoundly evil.” Dick’s parents lost their jobs after refusing to testify before committees investigating Communist influence among teachers (but both found employment in private schools).

As a student at Brooklyn College, Dick hid his Communist loyalties and joined the Young Democrats, eventually becoming its president. A fellow Communist served as president of Students for Democratic Action (the student affiliate of Americans for Democratic Action). To Dick, such deception was not infiltration, despite the rules excluding Communists from membership in both groups, but an effort “to revitalize these organizations.” Dick and Mickey began to harbor doubts about the CPUSA following Khrushchev’s famous 1956 speech condemning Stalin. Although they are vague on the timing, it appears that around 1960 or 1961 they publicly broke with the Communist movement. Despite their infiltrating and leaving, they couldn’t fathom why left-wing groups would be suspicious or intolerant of Communists. While now critical of the Communist Party as an organization, Dick remains proud of individual Communists like his parents for their “heroic defense of the best aspects of the American Constitution and the American political tradition.”

Attending graduate school in psychology at the University of Michigan, while Mickey worked as a lab technician, Dick became friendly with Tom Hayden, editor of the student paper. While not yet a member of SDS, Dick attended its famous Port Huron convention in 1962. The defining struggle at the meeting involved SDS’s attitude toward Communists. Michael Harrington, representing its parent group, the stalwart anti-Communist League for Industrial Democracy, argued against allowing Communists to join. Dick was primarily responsible for language in the statement that differentiated SDS from the Communist Old Left while rejecting anti-Communist “loyalty oaths.” It “seemed most unreasonable—and even immoral,” he writes, “that individuals, despite agreeing with an organization’s aims, could be purged or excluded from it simply because of some suspicion about their associates.” Mickey rejoiced at wording in the manifesto that would later enable a pluralistic anti-war movement, one that welcomed people who did not want to support the Vietcong but also allowed those who waved Vietcong flags to participate in demonstrations.

It turned out that welcoming Communists into SDS led to the capture of the organization by the Progressive Labor Party by 1968. Devoted to the principles of Mao Tse-tung and scourge of the New Left’s proclaimed commitment to participatory democracy, Progressive Labor’s disciplined cadres triumphed over two other factions, each professing loyalty to some form of Marxism-Leninism. The most infamous, the Weatherman group, soon embarked on a decade-long campaign of terrorist violence, bombing buildings, physically attacking enemies, engaging in group sex to smash monogamy, and rhetorically praising such murderers as Charles Manson.

The couple has little to say about the New Left’s descent into revolutionary madness and violence. While they were active in anti-war activity in Ann Arbor, Dick was focused on finishing his dissertation. In 1964, he was hired by the sociology department at the University of Chicago. Somewhat older than many of their SDS compatriots, as a married couple they were also more responsible and “grown-up.” They refused to let politics consume their lives and would leave meetings to go to football games, earning them the scorn of some friends. But Dick wanted an academic job, not one focused on the movement. And their professed attitudes seem to support this. They claim to have believed that angry attacks on America as racist and genocidal were counterproductive. Mickey disdained feminists who hated and denounced men. They were both uncomfortable with talk of revolution and glorification of the New Left’s descent into revolutionary madness and violence. But despite these eminently sensible views, they are quite reticent about how SDS was transformed, blaming a few younger leaders but professing little concern. After all, as an academic, Richard no longer was part of the organization. He has little to say about Hayden’s forays into armed struggle and offers only one—positive—mention of “former SDS leader and Weatherman” Bernardine Dohrn. He notes how pleased he was that she helped arrange publicity for his first book in Chicago. Dohrn, like her husband Bill Ayers, remains unapologetic about the bombings they helped carry out in the 1970s.

There are other odd omissions and admissions that reveal the authors’ attitudes toward Communists and Communist regimes.
There is relatively little about foreign affairs; Dick insists that radicals should take stands only “on issues where we could actively make a difference.” He proudly recounts his opposition to the Vietnam War and travelling to Bratislava to meet with North Vietnamese and Vietcong leaders. But he never mentions the boat people or reeducation camps or genocide that followed America’s defeat or the vitriol unleashed on radicals who denounced Communist repression. He disdains the social-democratic governments of Scandinavia and rejects authoritarian Communism, although he offhandedly remarks that in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, the Communists took power legitimately. He denounces China and Vietnam for beginning to promote capitalism. The couple named their second son for Vito Marcantonio, a Communist-aligned congressman from New York, because he cast one of the two votes against America’s defending South Korea. Scornful of the “conventional wisdom” that Alger Hiss was a Soviet agent, he says that the USSR was not an enemy while Hiss spied, and he wishes that “a new generation of historians would look with fresh eyes on the whole matter of U.S. Communist Party involvement in Soviet espionage.” And today, Mickey refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

Life at the University of Chicago was a series of conflicts. Although the “conservative” sociology department at Chicago had hired him despite his radical past, Dick was a perpetual troublemaker. His colleagues and the administration grudgingly tolerated his nonstop agitation and support for demonstrations against the university and the department for alleged sins, ranging from cooperating with the Selective Service System to denying a mediocre political activist tenure. Dick denounces one of his academic critics as “a street mobster” and another as “a sort of raving fascist.” While in Chicago, Mickey was robbed and they suffered a home invasion.

In May 1969, Dick was attacked in his office by an ax-wielding assailant and severely injured. Although the crime was never solved, he speculates, based on government files he later obtained, that a member of a right-wing group, the Legion of Justice, was probably responsible. So, spurning an offer of tenure at Chicago by his “fascist colleagues,” he moved to the University of California-Santa Barbara, where he spent the next three decades.

The last third of the book is a panegyric to the institutions and organizations that the couple helped create in their new home. They steadily built an alliance among university faculty, students, and community activists. This work was in part financed by millionaires and trust-finders living in the area, including Hayden’s then-wife, Jane Fonda. Although their major focus was environmentalism, they branched out into zoning regulations to restrict developers, limit population growth, and otherwise implement social control of the economy. While lauding their success, neither Dick nor Mickey considers why California, with the strictest environmental and development requirements in the country, has become the most inequalitarian state and is losing both businesses and middle-class residents to states like Texas.

Dick became a figure of some influence at UCSB. His effort to transform the university reflected his belief that in changing society, culture matters and higher education would play a crucial role in transforming American politics. As he pushed in various ways to institutionalize participatory democracy, he demonstrated that it could easily coexist with the ideological conformity that he once decried. He indignantly denies that there is any discrimination against Republicans or conservative faculty in higher education, even though they are now a rarity in the social sciences. And in any event, he notes, there is a wide range of opinions among people identifying as Democrats. Because he is open about his political beliefs in the classroom, he says, he was not secretly indoctrinating students. And he insists that he always made it “possible for conservative students to voice their thoughts and their perspectives” in his classes. Yet when he became chair of the sociology department in 1975, he undertook recruitment of new faculty focused on “commitment to social change.” And he has nothing to say about the phenomenon of students shutting down talks by conservative figures or seeking to marginalize dissenting viewpoints.

Since Communism and social democracy have both failed, the couple calls for a new New Left based on the idea that “all social relations—both macro and micro—should enable everyone to participate in making the decisions that affect them.” The key, they say, is to capture the Democratic Party and expel its corporate supporters and financiers. The mistake that Henry Wallace made in 1948 was to make a quixotic run as a third-party candidate. Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign, they believe, is evidence that socialists can transform America by focusing on concrete policies and avoiding inflammatory and divisive debates about ideology. They are also encouraged by the rise of Jeremy Corbyn’s new Labour Party in England. Never mind that Corbyn is an anti-Semite.

That Communists and other enemies of democracy have insinuated themselves into organizations that once shunned them (the new-
Commentary

Saving the Leaky Vessels

**The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today**
*By Jack Wertheimer*
Princeton University Press, 272 pages

Reviewed by
Roberta Rosenthal Kwall

*PARIS*. One were searching for a comprehensive study of American Judaism in the 21st century, complete with all of its contradictions and complexities, one would need look no further than Jack Wertheimer’s new volume—the winner of the 2018 National Jewish Book Award for American Jewish Studies. *The New American Judaism* is an examination of the religious lives of American Jews in their religious communities, based largely on personal interviews conducted with 160 rabbis across the denominations.

Wertheimer explores the Jewish beliefs and practices of the Jewish rank and file and demonstrates how and why the religious culture of non-Orthodox Jews is weakening and confined to liminal or “peak” moments. He also reveals the existence of a burgeoning level of creative, spiritual innovation among synagogues of all types. By the end, it is apparent that while Wertheimer appreciates the efforts behind such innovations, he believes that many are insufficient and at times misdirected.

Wertheimer begins by exploring a range of religious patterns, beliefs, and practices common on the spectrum of contemporary Jews. He then goes into detail on “the eclipse of Jewish denominations,” describing how Reform and Conservative Judaism both have become “leaky vessels.” He is struck by how few rabbis other than Chabad affiliates “expressed particular pride in their movement’s national leadership.”

For Wertheimer, Judaism is about the particulars of Jewish tradition that need to be practiced with consistency and intentionality on a daily basis. Although he does not dismiss the need for innovation to keep religious tradition relevant, he takes issue with the approach of the “Golden Rule Jews,” representing the bulk of non-Orthodox Jews, for whom the “core religious imperative” is being good to one’s fellow human beings. For Wertheimer, versions of Judaism based primarily on generalized, universalist principles are no substitute for the counter-cultural worldview and particular rituals characteristic of traditional Judaism.

Wertheimer’s honesty about the failings of Conservative Judaism in particular is refreshing, given his decades as a professor at the denomination’s central institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary. He also expresses dismay with decisions in both the Reform and Conservative movements compromising the quality and quantity of Jewish education. He discusses some of the ways in which these two movements have been growing closer in recent years, a phenomenon likely to continue given the rate of intermarriage among non-Orthodox Jews in general. The book would have benefited from a deeper dive into the question of whether there is a future for the Conservative and Reform movements as separate denominational and institutional entities.

The book’s final section about how Jewish religious life is being reinvented highlights three primary sites for renewal: intensely experimental start-ups, conventional synagogues, and the Orthodox outreach known as kiruv. Wertheimer accurately captures how kiruv workers instruct their non-Orthodox constituents regarding Jewish observance. He observes: “Teachers try to avoid being heavy-handed, but they do not shrink from speaking explicitly about God’s will.”
This certainty about what God wants from Jews on the part of kiruv workers and their unequivocal directives about what Judaism requires distinguishes them from the clergy of the more liberal denominations. His discussion invites contemplation of whether there is a lesson here for non-Orthodox clergy.

Wertheimer also documents the impact kiruv has made on Jewish life in America, and he demonstrates its remarkable fluidity. He notes that while only a minority of Jews become Orthodox as a result of kiruv effort, he finds kiruv workers themselves will often define success as strengthening Jewish activity in Reform, Conservative, and even federation circles, as well as a willingness to marry Jewish and raise “a Jewish family of any kind.”

Wertheimer frames Jewish religious practices and trends within the parameters of the issues facing religion as a whole in the United States, which clarifies that what is happening within American Judaism is not unique. His reliance on extensive rabbinic interviews adds to the richness and accessibility of The New American Judaism. Given Wertheimer’s stature as a senior educator in the field, he was able to tap into a pool of authorities that might have been difficult for other scholars to access.

One problem with this approach is that it might not shed sufficient light on the lived experience of significant portions of Jews who are either unaffiliated or affiliated but more guarded with their rabbis. To his credit, Wertheimer acknowledges this point at the outset.

Vital, necessary, and enjoyable to read, The New American Judaism is a significant contribution to the literature about this ever-altering community.

Won’t You Be My Neighbor?

Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive and Others Collapse
By Timothy P. Carney
Harper, 368 pages

Reviewed by
Alexandra Hudson

In recent years, publishers have produced a veritable library of books, many of them bestsellers, purporting to describe America’s white working class. Among these works, two questions consistently rise to the fore: Why have members of the white working class so strongly supported Donald Trump and, relatedly, why does the American dream appear to be receding ever further out of their reach? Tim Carney, commentary editor for the Washington Examiner, tackles both of these questions in his new book, Alienated America.

Carney follows in the footsteps of Tocqueville, traversing communities across America, to find his answers. He discovers that the vitality of the American dream turns primarily on geography—specifically, on whether one’s neighborhood is tightly knit together by the invisible bonds of civil society. Carney reports that among the communities he investigated, the inhabitants of wealthy ones—such as Chevy Chase, Maryland—tended to have faith in the American dream, tended to enjoy robust social associations, and tended to support Donald Trump’s presidency. In contrast, the people in the poorer communities he visited, especially those communities without strong civic ties, such as Fayette City, Pennsylvania, tended to lack confidence in America’s promises—and also tended to support our current president.

Carney explains the difference between these two sorts of towns in terms of alienation. The term, made famous by Karl Marx’s theory of labor and Soren Kierkegaard’s assessment of modern man’s malaise, describes the individual’s estrangement or isolation from society, from his intimates, or from himself. Carney argues that it is just this isolation that has rendered the American dream unobtainable for large swaths of our country’s population: The decline of civic institutions—most important, the church—has caused a degree of social alienation that has serious political consequences.

If this sounds familiar, it should. As Carney notes, his book draws heavily on the work of well-known writers and scholars: Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, and J.D. Vance on the decay of civil society, and Stanford’s Raj Chetty and MIT’s David Autor on this decay’s economic consequences. And many of his arguments echo these authors. Carney maintains that social and
economic dysfunction—single-parent households, drug abuse, mass unemployment, and the dissolution of community institutions—creates a deadly feedback loop. The resulting hopelessness, he says, has led many to seek salvation in the make-America-great-again nationalism of Donald Trump.

But Carney doesn’t simply restate these well-worn points. Rather, he uses his evocative personal narrative and independent reporting to bring life to the statistical descriptions of poor communities’ social and economic decline. For example, in the most moving section of the book, Carney describes what he learned when his baby daughter was in the ICU. His church community gathered around him and his family. They brought meals and treats to the hospital and drove his kids to school, sports, and lessons. This social capital—a capital they didn’t know they had until they needed it—is the stuff of the good life, which is why Carney sees a disintegrated American social fabric as the cause of so many ailments.

Carney also builds on earlier work by describing how houses of worship act as an important buttress against social fragmentation and political decay. Communities with strong religious groups of varied traditions—Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Catholicism, Dutch Reformed, and others—tended to be healthier and more optimistic about the future. And they were less prone to have voted for Trump. This is especially true of those communities whose inhabitants regularly attended church.

From God’s declaration in Genesis that it is not good for man to be alone and the wise affirmation of friendship offered by Aristotle, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius, to the African idea of Ubuntu (“a person becomes a person through other persons”), sages across time and place have understood that man can flourish only in relationship with others. It is only through community that we become fully human. Carney is strong on this point.

His assault on technology, however, falls short. Carney’s primary lament is that the decline of institutions leaves us with fewer opportunities to interact and come into close proximity with one another. He leads readers through an extensive discussion on how advances in technology have promoted atomization by making social relationships less important. We don’t eat out anymore; we have food delivered. We no longer ask friends or family for rides to the airport; we have Uber and Lyft. We don’t need to meet and get to know our neighbors should we require a cup of sugar; with Amazon Prime Now and FreshDirect, we can have groceries delivered to our home within the hour. We don’t go to the movie theater; we have Netflix. “The serendipitous encounters with neighbors become rarer and rarer as our lives are increasingly bespoke, made contingent on our whims and tastes,” Carney writes.

All this is certainly true: Technology makes it easier to avoid engaging with other people. Yet, interestingly, the healthy communities that Carney highlights are probably making good use of Uber, Amazon Prime, and Netflix. Indeed, technology is a problem only if you assume that engagement and proximity are sufficient conditions for forming and enhancing social relationships. We’re all familiar with the experience of riding the New York subway in a sea of strangers or being at the dinner table while the person across from us is thumbing away on their mobile device. Neither of these situations, though they bring people physically near together, necessarily results in relationships. The fact remains that despite enabling technologies, we do still leave our homes and have opportunities to interact with others regularly. The important questions is: How do we make those interactions count and mean more?

It is true that Americans are lonely and isolated. And Carney is right that, as with many important problems of the heart, the remedy is beyond the reach of politics. He does offer some “small solutions” that are within the government’s purview: Urban planners can promote neighborliness by mixing commercial and residential neighborhoods; walkability should be improved in various communities; and policies that make homes costlier should be done away with (as costlier homes mean less family formation).

Carney also admonishes readers to begin with the understanding that they are building a “City of God” in whatever geographical location they find themselves. And he is absolutely correct: The remedy does largely begin with us and how we approach and engage one another in our everyday lives. It starts with accepting, or initiating, the invitation to lunch or coffee, even though we are tired and busy. Or it is as simple as striking up a conversation with the person behind you in line at the grocery, exchanging direct eye contact, a smile, and a warm hello with your barista or fellow subway passengers. Greeting your fellow citizen is rare, and you may be rebuffed or met with confusion. But these habits of common decency, which help us to care about the well-being of one another, are the fundamental building blocks of the civil society whose demise so many political commentators lament. Without such habits, the future is bleak for our civil and political institutions, and for each of us.
The case for Chopin

By Terry Teachout

Of the well-known composers of the 19th century, Fryderyk Chopin (as his name is spelled in Polish, his native tongue) is the only one whose complete works continue to be played regularly—indeed, without cease. Most of the pianists who had major international careers in the 20th century performed and recorded such staples of his catalogue as the A-flat Polonaise (“Heroic”) and the B-flat Minor Piano Sonata (“Funeral March”). They remain central to the repertoires of the rising generation of virtuosi, just as they have always been beloved by concertgoers. Yet Chopin’s phenomenal popularity was long viewed with suspicion by critics, in part because his compositions, without exception, all make use of the piano; in addition, most of them are solo pieces that are between two and 10 minutes in length. No other important classical composer has worked within so tightly circumscribed a compass.

This fact initially caused Chopin to be depicted, especially in Central Europe and Victorian England, as a figure of lesser consequence than his contemporaries, a miniaturist who turned out salon pieces that were wrought with deftness and grace but nonetheless did not deserve to be spoken of in the same breath as the large-scale masterpieces of Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Wagner, and Tchaikovsky. H.L. Mencken summed up this point of view in a 1912 epigram: “Chopin—two embalmers at work upon a minor poet.”

It was to be shared by a small but influential group of 20th-century pianists, the best known of whom were Edwin Fischer, Glenn Gould, and Artur Schnabel, and their pupils and followers, among them Alfred Brendel, Clifford Curzon, and Leon Fleisher. None of them played Chopin’s music in public other than sporadically, if at all. “If I spend the same amount of time with a Chopin [étude] or with...
some Beethoven bagatelle, I get
tired of the Chopin piece sooner,”
Schnabel once said.

In addition, it was widely felt
that there was something suspect,
perhaps even unhealthy, about
Chopin’s exquisite lyricism. Ni-
etzsche claimed that “it is not all
that rare that his music comes
across as pale, lacking sunlight, op-
pressed, even though elegantly and
richly clothed.” Furthermore, some
of his ardent admirers seemed not
to have fully grasped the nature
of his achievement. “People were
simply enchanted with Chopin’s
music in the United States,” said
the pianist Claudio Arrau. “They
never considered that he might
also be profound.”

All this helps explain why Alan
Walker’s Fryderyk Chopin: A Life
and Times, which came out in
the U.S. last October, is the first
full-scale English-language pri-
mary-source biography of Cho-
pin. * Best known for his definitive
three-volume biography of Franz
Liszt, Walker has done an equally
thorough and thoughtful job of
recounting the life of Poland’s fore-
most composer, of whose music he
is an unstinting admirer. At first
glance, Chopin’s life would seem
to have been uneventful, especially
by comparison with that of Liszt,
a gargantuan personality who ap-
ppeared both as a pianist and a con-
ductor before sold-out crowds in
every corner of Europe, renowned
as a composer as well as an inter-
preter of other men’s works.

Chopin, by contrast, was a
publicity-shunning introvert who
played only his own music and
performed mainly in the salons of
Paris and England on increasingly
rare occasions. He made his liv-
ing teaching piano to well-heeled
students of indifferent ability. He
wrote no autobiography, died too
soon to make records, and left be-
hind no symphonies, string quar-
tets, operas, or ballets for a later
generation of writers to parse at
leisure and at length.

By all rights, then, Chopin
should have gone the way of the
many other 19th-century pianist-
composers whose renown did not
outlive them. Instead, his music is
as familiar today as it was at the
time of his death in 1849. It is ubiq-
uitous—but is it truly great?

A

CHILD PRODIGY BORN
not far from Warsaw in
1810, Chopin was doubt-
less infected in boyhood with the
tuberculosis that killed him at the
age of 39. In 1830, he emigrated to
France to pursue a musical career.
He settled in Paris in 1831 and lived
there for the rest of his life, never
returning to the land of his birth.
Prevented by illness from lead-
ing the exhausting life of a barn-
storming virtuoso, Chopin chose
instead to appear mainly in do-
mestic settings intimate enough to
accommodate his style, which was
quiet but full of delicate nuances.
He is believed to have played in
public fewer than 20 times, leading
Hector Berlioz to complain that
“unless you are a prince, a minister,
or an ambassador, you might as
well give up hope of hearing him.”
To the extent that he ever
became a true celebrity, it was
because of his liaison with George
Sand, the French novelist with
whom he lived from 1838 to 1847.
Sand smoked opium-spiked cigars,
dressed in men’s clothing, adopted
a male pseudonym to advertise
her feminist beliefs, and wrote
baldly autobiographical novels,
among them one about Chopin
that she published while they were
still together. His fast-deteriorating
health—he grew so frail that he had
to be carried up staircases by his va-
let—and her evident lack of interest
meant that their relationship soon
became all but sexless. But it was
still scandalous, which presumably
contributed to his lifelong inclina-
tion to keep a low profile. While
he had famous friends, includ-
ing Liszt, Eugène Delacroix, and
Heinrich Heine, the rarity of his
concerts meant that he was known
to the public at large solely through
his music.

Unlike Sand, Chopin was not
a confessional artist. Not only did
he give his pieces such blankly ge-
ergic titles as “étude” and “scherzo,”
but no more than a handful have
any known connection to specific
events in his life. In Walker’s words:
“His [études], preludes, nocturnes,
mazurkas, and polonaises seem to
exist in rarefied seclusion, unfet-
tered by the human condition. …
We could almost describe Chopin
as a displaced person of musical
history—a classical composer in
word and deed, condemned to walk
in silence among the chattering
romantics.”

* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 768 pages
Walker successfully penetrates Chopin's hard shell of reserve and conveys a clear sense of his private personality, which was fascinating but unattractive. Foppishly vain, sarcastic to a fault, and nastily anti-Semitic, he had no use for the music of most of his fellow romantics, and said so. He reserved his admiration for Bach, Mozart, and Bellini, dismissing Beethoven as "vulgar" and describing Liszt in a way that not only encapsulates his own jaundiced view of musical romanticism but is typical of his acid sense of humor: "One of these days he will be a member of parliament, or perhaps even King of Abyssinia or the Congo—but as regards the themes from his compositions, well, they will remain buried with the newspapers."

Chopin's reluctance to play for large audiences, Walker tells us, had as much to do with his stage fright (and, very likely, his snobbishness) as it did with his physical incapacities. He told Liszt that "the public frightens me; I feel suffocated by its panting breath, paralysed by its curious glance." Yet he believed devoutly in his own genius, declaring his "noble wish and intention to create for myself a new world."

That musical world was full of the melting tenderness heard in Chopin's 21 nocturnes (written between 1827 and 1846), in which he translated into pianistic terms the lyricism of the golden-age operatic sopranos whose singing he adored. It may have been these pieces that inspired Heine to call Chopin the "Raphael of the piano," going on to say that "when he plays I forget all other masters of the instrument... and sink into the sweet abyss of his music, into the melancholy rapture of his exquisite and profound creations." Chopin's music, the nocturnes in particular, had a strongly improvisational quality. But the pieces that were first improvised and then written down were then subjected to a rigorous, endlessly protracted process of revision.

To be sure, most of them were small-scale, even gnomic utterances, albeit ones that sound emotionally depths disproportionate to their brevity. Had their sweet melancholy been all there was to Chopin, though, he would now be remembered as a strictly minor master. But even on the smallest of scales, he was also capable of summoning up the colossal force heard in his "Revolutionary" Étude (1831), into whose two and a half minutes he packed all of the desperate tumult that he had in mind when, referring to the anguish that Poland's dismemberment by its neighbors at that moment in time created in him, he told a friend that he was "only able to pour out my grief at the piano." To hear such a piece is to be forced to rethink conventional wisdom about the nature of the relationship between chronologically duration and expressive "scale."

Noteworthy in another way are the 60-odd mazurkas (1825-49), concise pieces in triple meter that are subtly poetic evocations of a Polish folk-dance form that are compact yet grandiose utterances of which the G Minor Ballade (1835), one of Vladimir Horowitz's signature pieces, is the most famous. In it, Chopin gives the impression of telling a wordless "story" whose implications are dire. Had it entered the world as the first movement of a piano sonata, the G Minor Ballade would have left no doubt that he was a great composer. Yet it is complete in itself, needing no companion movements to achieve its emotional catharsis. Robert Schumann had the piano concertos in mind when he called Chopin's music "cannons buried in flowers," but he might as well have been thinking of this profoundly, devastatingly tragic work.

On the extremely rare occasions when Chopin did essay multimovement form, most notably in the B-flat Minor and B Minor Piano Sonatas of 1839 and 1844, the gripping results gave the lie to the censuring bon mot that Hugh Reginald Haweis, a Victorian cleric...
who dabbled in music criticism, tucked into a once-admired 1871 treatise called *Music and Morals*: “He was great in small things, and small in great ones.”

In those days, English music criticism was still in thrall of the prudery that George Bernard Shaw curtly dismissed as “ladylike.” Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Shaw saw that Chopin, far from being a mere miniaturist, was an innovator of the first rank, going so far as to invidiously compare a piece by Haydn to the B-flat Minor Sonata: “Nothing was clearer about it than that it beat Haydn’s work in point of form. Yes, I quite mean it: it was as if Haydn had put his bricks into a hod in a set pattern, whilst Chopin had built something with his.”

Shaw’s view is now dominant. The once-conventional critical “wisdom” about Chopin’s music has finally become a thing of the past: He is now recognized as a master for whom no apologies of any kind need be made. And as fine as Alan Walker’s biography is, it is not necessary to read a word of it to know that Chopin was in every way the equal of any of the greatest classical composers who have ever lived. One need only listen—and marvel.

Sohrab, So Good

*From Fire, by Water: My Journey to the Catholic Faith*

BY SOHRAB AHMARI

St. Ignatius Press, 240 pages

Reviewed by JONATHAN V. LAST

Sohrab Ahmari grew up in an almost stereotypically bohemian household. His parents were well-educated free spirits of the kind familiar to anyone who lived through the 1970s: They smoked and drank and had only one child. They encouraged their son to address them not as “mom” or “dad”—so bourgeois—but by their first names. They were atheists who wanted young Sohrab to be disdainful of the rubes who mindlessly put their faith in some imaginary higher power. They wanted him, above all, to always “be yourself.”

Ahmari’s parents threw grown-up parties and allowed their son to socialize with the adults as an equal. When they took him to the beach on holiday, they’d bring along a hot-water bottle full of booze and get buzzed with their friends in front of him. They divorced before his childhood was complete. This picture of Ahmari’s youth as a potted version of post-’60s suburban America will be familiar to anyone who has read or seen *The Ice Storm*. Except for one thing: Sohrab Ahmari grew up in post-revolutionary Iran.

*From Fire, by Water* is Ahmari’s remarkable memoir about his journey away from these very interesting beginnings. It is made more remarkable because it’s actually about two journeys: from Tehran to Utah to New York City—but also from Islam, to atheism, to Catholicism.

Until his teen years, Ahmari lived in Tehran in an upper-middle-class compound with his mother, father, and grandparents. His family was an odd collection: His father was a hard-drinking architect who, even as an adult, idolized Holden Caulfield. His grandfather had been a prosperous, secular government worker under the shah and had supported the revolution out of nationalist sympathies—and was shocked when things turned out badly.

Some of Ahmari’s childhood was not terribly distant from most Americans—he had satellite TV and watched VHS tapes of the latest Hollywood movies. But there were important differences. For instance, on one family trip to the shore (his family was well-off enough that they vacationed by the Caspian Sea), the Ahmari family was stopped at a “morality” check-point by the Iranian *komiteh*. They were interrogated for two hours, during which time Ahmari prayed that his parents would not be flogged, arrested, or worse. This is not the sort of thing a boy forgets.

The result of such experiences was that, from an early age, Ahmari held his homeland in disdain. He saw Iran as a backward-looking culture whose animating forces were anger and grievance. Instead, he pined for America and the West, for modernity and reason and freedom. When Ahmari was 13, he got his wish: He and his mother were given green cards and they emigrated to the United States. They settled with an uncle who was already living in Utah. At which point Ahmari quickly became disenchanted with America.

*From Fire, by Water* is a book of

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many virtues, the most unexpected of which is Ahmari’s subtle brand of comedy, because, a third of the way through, it becomes, in addition to everything else, a fish-out-of-water story par excellence.

Ahmari arrives in the United States throbbing with excitement at finally being freed of the confines of religious zealotry. He expects America to be the godless, hedonistic, modern paradise he’s seen in the movies. Except that he’s in Utah. And while the Mormons he meets are all very pleasant and there are is no komiteh and you can, technically, drink coffee, the teenage Ahmari is quietly outraged at being surrounded by pious teetotalers who don’t smoke, or have premarital sex, or even swear. Finding himself surrounded by the closest thing the West has to a friendly, smiling Sharia, Ahmari decides to rebel. So he becomes a Goth.

The picture of this sophisticated Iranian teenager coming to America and being disillusioned not because it’s a den of soulless hedonism but because it isn’t decadent enough is, all on its own, worth the price of admission. Having him then don a black trench coat and combat boots in an attempt to stick it to the Osmonds? This is solid, 14-karat gold.

From the Goths, Ahmari progresses to real-deal socialism. He begins by cold-calling a local Communist group, the Worker’s Alliance, and joining so as to take up the class struggle. His group runs a self-published newspaper called Equity and the most sublime joke in From Fire, by Water may be that the next time Ahmari finds himself on staff at a newspaper, the publication is the Wall Street Journal. The second best joke is that Ahmari’s political conservatism is awakened by his experience working with Teach for America.

But Ahmari’s path to conservative belief is shorter than the one that ultimately leads him to religious belief and, finally, to the Catholic Church. It starts slowly. A heavy, self-hating drinker, Ahmari finds himself walking around the Penn Station neighborhood one evening killing time while waiting for a train. He had spent the previous night on a bender. For no good reason, he goes into the Church of St. John the Baptist, on 30th Street, as Mass is about to begin. He sits in the back pew. And he weeps.

Catholic converts tend to fall into two categories: heart Catholics and head Catholics. The heart Catholics are drawn to the faith because belief is something inside them that they cannot shake off. They can rationalize their love for the church no more than they can rationalize their love for their mother. It simply is.

For head Catholics, faith is a matter of reason: The church teaches certain things, and once you begin the chain of moral reasoning with the most basic precept (that truth exists), it leads, inexorably, to Catholicism. You can stop at as many philosophical way stations as you like—Aristotle, Hume, Kant—but for them the roads of reason, too, all lead to Rome. Many times a head Catholic can explain to you exactly why he believes. But ask them to describe the feeling of their belief and it is as if you’re speaking an alien language.

Ahmari is the rare Catholic who is both head and heart. He is reduced to tears by the beauty of the son of God. But what brings him to the foot of the cross is his search for truth. Everything else is pale beside the foundational question: Is this true?

In one way, Sohrab Ahmari’s story is a particularly American one: Where else could a boy arrive from the shores of one of our fiercest enemies and end up writing for the Wall Street Journal—and Commentary, where he was a senior writer for a year before becoming the op-ed editor of the New York Post—two decades later? Where else could a former Muslim become an angry atheist, then fall under the thrall of socialism, and finally embrace the Catholic Church, all while being left wholly unmolested by the culture, the government, and the citizenry?

But in another way, Ahmari’s tale is alien to the way Americans live now. Today, a great many people believe things simply because they already believe them. They brook no dissent and view reexamination as an affront. What makes Sohrab Ahmari so different is that, even when he is at his most intransigent, his first commitment is always to the truth, and he is willing to keep asking questions in search of it.

In that way From Fire, by Water is a spiritual memoir perfectly suited to our time.
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of a map hanging in Tlaib’s office. Someone had stuck to the map a Post-it note on which they had written “Palestine” and drawn an arrow pointing to Israel. Not subtle. Tlaib invited Women’s March organizer Linda Sarsour, a vicious critic of Israel who has ties to anti-Semite Louis Farrakhan, to the opening day of Congress. By January 6, describing senators who support a GOP Senate bill that would combat BDS, Tlaib tweeted, “They forgot what country they represent.” Here was an outright accusation of dual loyalty, an old anti-Semitic trope. And an ironic one, too, considering how Tlaib wrapped herself in the flag of the Palestinian Authority on the night of her election.

Tlaib’s personal history acts as cover for her fringe politics. Press outlets are so infatuated with the election of two Muslim women to Congress—Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota also backs BDS—that news stories hardly ever mention their views on the Middle East. Last August, the New York Times published a story by Elizabeth Dias with the headline “For Rashida Tlaib, Palestinian Heritage Infuses a Detroit Sense of Community.” But Dias seemed too dumbfounded by Tlaib’s religion to devote any space to her actual foreign-policy views:

Her story offers a remarkable counterpoint to anti-Muslim policy and sentiment rising around the country, and especially to President Trump, who has banned travel from several majority-Muslim countries. ...

In a year when a record number of women are running for Congress, and races across the country, include gay, lesbian, and transgender candidates and many people of color, Ms. Tlaib, 42, represents a new addition to the mosaic of American politics. ...

... For the first time, an American almost certainly on her way to Congress stood shoulder to shoulder with her Muslim sisters and bowed toward Mecca.

We get it—she’s Muslim! How about you ask her why she lied to her fellow Democrats at J Street?

CNN.com devoted two articles to the meaning of Tlaib’s election. Neither mentioned BDS, and both read spookily like campaign material. On January 3, Clare Foran wrote a piece headlined “Rashida Tlaib made history with her swearing-in. Here’s what to know about the first Palestinian-American woman to serve in Congress.” It contained the biographical information you’d expect in a run-of-the-mill profile of a freshman congressman. My favorite part was the section titled “Tlaib has broken barriers and glass ceilings before,” which could have come from either a press release or an indictment.

“When the new Congress gets underway, Tlaib will have a high-profile platform on Capitol Hill to confront the president and try to shape the agenda of the new House Democratic majority,” Foran wrote. “The question now is what will she do when she gets to Washington?”

The second CNN.com article, by Christina Zdanowicz, was published on January 4. It was a hard-hitting, serious piece on...who am I kidding, the story was about Tlaib’s fashion choices. “Women honor Rashida Tlaib by wearing Palestinian gowns as she is sworn in to Congress,” read the headline. Tlaib’s decision to wear a traditional Palestinian gown, or thobe, to Capitol Hill won plaudits on social media, we are told. “Rashida Tlaib on Thursday became the first Palestinian-American woman to be sworn in to Congress,” wrote Zdanowicz. “Weeks ago, she announced she would wear a thobe to the ceremony and she kept her word.”

Subheadings in this post included “A solidarity movement is born on social media” and “Women of Palestinian heritage dressed to support her.” By the end of the piece, I was expecting another section entitled “Grain production on collective farms rises 10 percent,” but it never arrived.

Nuaddi Darraj, a Tlaib supporter who publicized the #TweetYourThobe hashtag, told CNN.com, “We have a Congress that finally looks like our country and that’s incredibly thrilling to me.” Less thrilling to me is the prospect of a national media so bedazzled by the diversity of the Democratic Congress that it pays little attention to the policies democratic socialists would have us adopt. A Politico headline last August read, “Rashida Tlaib Is the Left’s Way Forward.” Uh oh.
ANCY PELOSI OPENED the 116th Congress with a hosanna to bipartisanship, compromise, and civility. The spirit of magnanimity lasted approximately 10 hours. Then video of Rashida Tlaib began circulating on the Internet. Speaking at a party, the Michigan Democrat, daughter of Palestinian immigrants, self-described democratic socialist, and newly minted congresswoman, shouted: “We're gonna impeach the mother—er!”

Tlaib's outburst was no surprise to close observers of her political career. She gained notoriety in August 2016 when she heckled then-candidate Donald Trump during a speech at the Detroit Economic Club. She was arrested last October during a protest at a McDonald's. Her Twitter feed contains plenty of salty language: “When it's our brown or black babies dying,” she wrote last December, “those in power to change it, don’t give a s—.” Nor did she back away from her vulgar description of the president. “I will always speak truth to power. #unapologetically me,” she tweeted during the controversy over her remarks. A few days later, she co-wrote a pro-impeachment op-ed for the *Detroit Free Press*.

Tlaib combines maximally left-wing positions with a maximally confrontational attitude, so she will have no trouble inside Pelosi’s House of Resistance. But it would be unfair to call her an obnoxious, far-left rabble-rouser. She is far worse. Tlaib is using her notoriety to bring anti-Semitic policies and rhetoric into the mainstream—and many news outlets are far too obsessed with the novelty of her identity to care. They suffer from milestone myopia—the inability to see beyond a person’s race, ethnicity, creed, and gender.

Running last August in a competitive primary to replace John Conyers, Tlaib supported a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. She also said she wanted to continue aid to Israel. These positions won her the endorsement of the progressive group J Street, and the donations that often follow its imprimatur. But as soon as she won—by fewer than 1,000 votes—Tlaib changed her mind. “I will not support racist countries that pick and choose who gets access to justice,” she told *In These Times*. She endorsed the so-called right of return, said she stands “by the rights of people who support” the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement, or BDS, and called for a one-state solution.

Rashida Tlaib would deny military aid to a strategic ally. She backs activists waging economic warfare against said ally. She lends her voice to bi-nationalism, which would change the character of the Jewish State beyond recognition. The policies she supports would abolish Israel as the national home of the Jewish people. She isn't talking about overturning the outcome of 1967. She's talking about overturning 1948.

And her position has hardened with time. Last December, in an interview with the Intercept, Tlaib announced, “I personally support the BDS movement.” She said that she planned to rebuke the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, by leading her own congressional delegation on a fact-finding mission to the West Bank. “I don’t think AIPAC provides a real, fair lens into this issue,” she said. “It’s one sided. ... [They] have these lavish trips to Israel, but they don’t show the side that I know is real, which is what’s happening to my grandmother and what’s happening to my family there.”

Early in January, Buzzfeed reporter Hannah Al-lam tweeted a photograph

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February 2019
Secure Israel's Golan Heights Rule

It's time to affirm Israel's Golan Heights sovereignty—protecting U.S. interests and preventing Iranian and Hezbollah terrorists from overrunning the Middle East.

Syria abused its 21-year commanding position on the Golan Heights to shell Israeli civilians below with thousands of mortars. Since repulsing Syrian attacks in 1967 and 1973 wars, Israel finally annexed the Golan Heights, keeping it peaceful and secure now for 52 years.

What are the facts?

Syria has treated Israel as its enemy since the founding of the Jewish state, waging belligerent wars against Israel in 1948, 1967 and 1973—and losing each one. Israel took possession of the Golan Heights following the 1967 Six-Day War. After consistent refusals by Syrian dictator Hafez al Assad to negotiate peace, Israel asserted sovereignty over the Heights in 1981. As the Syrian state dissolved into civil war and now exists as a puppet state under Russian and Iranian protection, Israeli control over this 695-square-mile territory provides invaluable strategic security on its Syrian border—for itself, as well as for U.S. and world interests. These critical concerns make a compelling case for the United States and other world powers to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights now.

Israel's Golan Heights sovereignty keeps U.S. enemies in check. The U.S. has opposed Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad since he ascended to office in 2000, due to brutal treatment of his own people—including the murder of half a million Syrian civilians—as well as his sponsorship of international terror and consistent opposition to U.S. policies. Today, Syria's existence depends on its power-sharing with two of America's greatest enemies, Russia and Iran. With the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Syria, Israel's sovereignty on the Golan Heights remains our strongest bulwark against Syrian, Russian and especially Iranian aggression.

Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights impedes Iranian imperialism. As the world's largest sponsor of global terrorism, Iran has mounted an expansionist drive designed to give it a powerful hegemonic land bridge from Teheran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut. Both Iran and its Lebanese proxy, the designated-terrorist group Hezbollah, have sworn to destroy Israel, and both have stationed troops and armaments near Israel's border with Syria. Iran also uses its Syrian bases to ferry advanced missile and anti-aircraft technology to Hezbollah in order to fortify the terror group's hand against Israel from Lebanon. Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights allows Jerusalem to monitor Teheran's imperialist misdeeds closely and defeat them before they can further threaten Israel and regional stability.

International law supports Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. While international law prohibits the acquisition of territory through aggressive conquest, it is universally agreed that Israel's control of the Golan Heights was the result of a defensive war. When Israel defeated Syrian belligerence in 1967, no international strictures against defensive conquest existed. What's more, the United States has even recognized territory seized in aggressive wars, such as the Republic of Vietnam's sovereignty over both the north and south of the country, and India's illegal seizure of the Portuguese territory of Goa.

“Recognizing Israel's Golan Heights sovereignty would be a powerful form of justice.”

Syria's Assad regimes should be punished for warmongering. Syria has been one of the most brutal and bloody nations in the Middle East, having engineered the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri, used outlawed poisonous chemicals to kill its own people, and committed such war crimes as torture and bombardment of its civilians. In addition, Syria has waged unprovoked war against Israel three times. To insist on return of the Golan Heights to Syria would reward the evil of the Assad regimes—whereas recognizing Israel's sovereignty would be a powerful form of justice.

Syria's civil war and subsequent domination by Russia and Iran have turned the Arab nation into one of the most unstable in the Middle East—and likely to remain so for generations to come. In addition, Syria has steadfastly refused to consider peace with Israel in exchange for return of the Golan Heights. Israel has now controlled the Golan Heights for 52 years—more than twice as long as Syria's 21 years. Whereas Syria's reign over the Golan Heights was marked by constant attacks on neighboring Israel, Israel's rule has ensured peace and stability. It's time for the U.S. to recognize Israel' righteous, legal and strategically critical sovereignty over the Golan territory.

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