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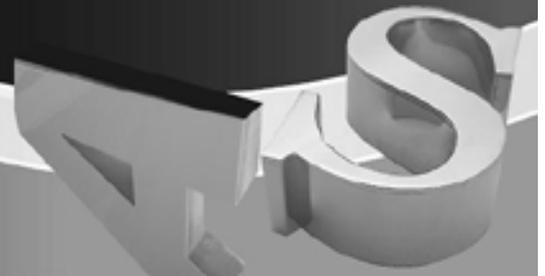


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AMASS

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Number 2



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AMASS

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COVER:

“BENEATH A SEPIA SKY”

DAN MARCUS



“Beneath a Sepia Sky”

Cover design by Dan Marcus.

A Cover Story. Is there anybody who hasn't seen *The Wizard of Oz*? Do you recall what happens when Dorothy lands in Oz after the sepia-toned scenes in Kansas? Now imagine watching the movie when it was first released in 1939. My friend, educator Dr. Martin Cohen, experienced just that at the age of six. He tells it best: “I'll never forget ... the black and white film turning into a fantastic splash of color. The theater was packed with kids from my neighborhood and I think I screamed louder than the gasps and the uproar in the movie theater that emanated from the mouths of everyone. We'd never seen anything like it!”

This issue's cover took the opposite trajectory—from glorious color to sepia-toned black and white. It's a blown-up sliver of a full-color, panoramic photograph. Many thanks to the prominent photographer who prefers to remain nameless and graciously allowed his magnificent work to be “distressed” in this fashion. Welcome to Hollywood!

-DM

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TWO ANGLES ON MATTHEW SPEKTOR

DAN MARCUS AND
JOHN O'KANE

With the publication of his acclaimed second novel, *American Dream Machine*, in 2013, Matthew Spektor found himself thrust into the pantheon of indispensable LA writers, which includes among its members such literary lights as Nathanael West, John Fante, Raymond Chandler, Joan Didion, and Charles Bukowski. Spektor's sweeping new addition to the California literary canon spans two generations, two coasts, and five decades—from the '60s to the early years of the present millennium. The story presents the movie industry from the gut-level standpoint of the agents—the book's title refers to a maverick agency established by the book's principals—during a period of tectonic shifts in the industry and the culture at large.

American Dream Machine crackles with an intimate verisimilitude owing, no doubt, to Spektor's real life circumstances—he grew up in the shadow of the film business. His father, Fred Spektor, was and still is a top agent for CAA. The younger Spektor found his footing on the creative land bridge that connects the not-quite-contiguous continents of film and literature, with an emphasis on the latter. He's been a director of literary acquisitions for several prominent production companies, a prolific essayist, and the writer of a screen adaptation of Shirley Hazzard's award-winning novel, *The Transit of Venus*. Spektor is also a founding editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

The following conversation with Matthew Spektor was conducted by *AMASS* editor John O'Kane and screenwriter Dan Marcus, with O'Kane focusing on the literary side of the equation and Marcus focusing on the cinematic. Spektor's insights and observations proved to be as illuminating and entertaining as anyone exposed to his work could have hoped for.

* * *

JOHN O'KANE: The novel's narrator, Nate Myer, maintains a certain aloofness for much of the book; he seems to be *in* the world you're depicting but not *of* it. Also, besides narrating the story as it unfolds, he bears the responsibility of having to narrate events that took place before he was born. Could you comment on these creative choices?

MATTHEW SPEKTOR: When I started writing *American Dream Machine*, I had the problem most writers have—I think—regarding persuasiveness and authority. I was describing a world I either couldn't quite remember or wasn't even alive to experience in the first place. It took me a little trial and error, but eventually I realized—my friend David Shields was always telling me that the secret to great work is that you give the problems you're having with the work to the work. If I made my narrator a little fuzzy-headed, a little unclear on the details himself, that gave me license to invent.

For a hot second I thought this was a novel idea—a new kind of narrator—but eventually, of course, I recognized it was the oldest trick in the book. It's the same thing Fitzgerald did with *Gatsby*, a character who remained impenetrable until he invented a narrator, Nick Carraway, who could encounter and describe the man's opacity for himself.

All the problems of fiction—of anything, really—are ones of perspective. There's always a certain amount of head banging required, I think, before the perspective becomes legible. Everything else pretty much follows that.

O'KANE: You say you weren't alive to experience the world of your novel or couldn't quite remember it ...

and your explanation about your narrator nicely addresses the issue. Does that mean then that a significant amount of the story is completely fictitious? How much? You did say that Beau is more or less modeled on your father. Could you say that the story is a docu-fiction of changes in the industry?

SPEKTOR: Not to be lawyerly, but after a while it becomes difficult to know where the lines between memory and invention are drawn exactly. The book is fiction—it's a novel—but like most decent novels—what I'd consider to be such, anyway—it borrows pretty richly against life. My father is a talent agent, albeit one who doesn't much resemble Beau. I grew up in Santa Monica like Nate did and it's fair to say that a lot of the particulars of my own life have been

**I like to say I'm
the only person
ever to leave
Los Angeles in
order to get into the
film industry and
to come back in order to
become a novelist.**

— Matthew Spektor

configured, with some distortion, into the book. The house I grew up in, the friends I had (and have), the things that were on the radio, the places we hung out—they're all there. The dialogue, the events, the order of those events, the style in which those events are presented even . . . these things are, for the most part, fiction. When my actual father read the book, he said to me, "It's like looking at my life . . . without me in it." I'd say the same. The book is a perfect chronicle of my own life as it belongs to someone who's not exactly me. If it were a movie, it would be something shot entirely on location. There's no green screen, no VFX. Only the performances are made up.

For sure, it is a kind of docu-fiction about changes in the industry. This was my explicit intention. I worked in the business myself in the late '90s—I was a studio executive—and I was struck, then, by the hard contours that seemed to impose themselves upon the actual making of movies. You couldn't say, "I have a great script and a filmmaker" and so on. You had to say, "This is the budget and here is the math." Filmmaking—studio filmmaking, at least—seemed to travel from being an art form to being . . . I won't say a "science," but a subset of arithmetic. The movie itself was secondary—possibly even tertiary—to the financial calculus required to justify its making. Which struck me—not to put too fine a point on it—as fucked up. It is fucked up. Movies are an art. It used to be, no matter how concerned a studio was about protecting its investment, this was an agreed-upon fact. Movies were an art form which happened to cost money to produce instead of merely an investment whose sole purpose was to provide a certain return. And I was interested in telling a story that would show the effect of this transformation—this cultural shift, which is ongoing not just inside the movie

business but within the entire capitalist landscape, still—on a man who was the product of another world. The world of Arthur Miller, Horatio Alger, the so-called "American Dream." How would such a person fare in this newer and less forgiving landscape?

DAN MARCUS: You have Nate developing a career adapting literary works into screenplays. In real life, you did the same for Shirley Hazzard's novel, *The Transit of Venus*. Can you describe that experience? Also—if you'll pardon the phrase—can you "compare and contrast" the process of adaptation vs. creating material from scratch?

SPECKTOR: Well, Shirley's novel is a straight-up masterpiece, one of the best English language novels of the 20th Century. It's also a tearjerking love story. I read it right around the time *The English Patient* was a hit—again, doesn't that feel like lifetimes ago?—and it struck me as, well, that rare thing: a great literary novel that stood a chance of being adaptable. By the time I was able to try my hand at it many people had already been involved in previous attempts. David Williamson, the Australian writer; I believe David Hare. I heard a rumor that Tom Stoppard had written a draft of it once, though I've never been able to verify this. I thought, well, all the obvious approaches have surely been tried, as well as most of the not-so-obvious ones, so I'll just do what Minghella said he did with *The English Patient*—read the book once, stuff it in a corner, write the adaptation more or less from memory, and then see what I had. My script turned out to be quite different from the novel—radically so—but it spent several years in development at Warner Brothers and there were a lot of prominent actors, actresses,

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and filmmakers who attached themselves at different times. It was a good script, but I think that kind of epic love story . . . well, they don't make those movies anymore. Not that they ever did very often to begin with.

Honestly, by the time I was done writing it, it felt like its own entity. I don't know that there is a difference between adaptation and composing original material for me. In the end, you still have to build the movie from the ground up.

MARCUS: Can you describe your experience working in development for such iconic companies as TriBeCa Productions, Jersey Films, and Fox 2000?

SPECKTOR: Ha! Well that was a long time ago. It staggers me to consider that when I worked in development, Bill Clinton was still in office. That said . . . I never had any great interest in working in development in LA. I took those jobs—Tribeca first, and then kinda scaled the ladder at the other places—because they were in New York and I realized they'd give me a great chance to spy on the publishing industry. I was writing fiction even then, and if I'm honest, the only reason I went to work in development—other than the fact it was reasonably well-paying and generally desirable—was because it afforded a fair amount of access. I liked being able to talk to writers, take editors and agents to lunch, since in each case my job at all of those places centered around acquiring the film rights to literary properties. I like to say I'm the only person ever to leave Los Angeles in order to get into the film industry and to come back in order to become a novelist.

MARCUS: How did your development career inform *American Dream Machine*?

SPECKTOR: It was an education, for sure. These were the first "real" jobs I'd ever had. Before that I had writer jobs—the kinds of part-time side-hustles you have in your twenties when you work in the arts. Freelance gigs, temp jobs. I worked at a toy company for a month and a half, answered phones at a law office. To go from that—thanks to a series of chance meetings and lucky breaks too convoluted to describe here—to working for Robert De Niro was trippy. To say I enjoyed it is putting it mildly. But what I really learned is that the business really is governed by people who don't have much control over their personalities. And, to be clear, by "the business" I really mean any business. Not just film. I'm not talking at all about De Niro—who was lovely, actually—or about Danny DeVito—same—or any of the "names" that I worked for. I'm talking rather about the business, the cogs. You realize that this thing that we externalize as "Hollywood" is actually just a big cauldron of private neuroses working themselves out on a public stage. All kinds of deals and decisions get made based on these things, and the stuff that we see—or at least the stuff we used to see, the idea of art and all that—has little to do with it. I guess this has become more evident as the deranged and terrible behavior of the Kevin Spaceys and Harvey Weinsteins of the world becomes a matter of public record. But understanding up close and personal that the movie business isn't some enigmatic system where art and commerce duke it out in the abstract, but rather a place that's altogether messy and runs on vulnerability and

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human frailty . . . that, for sure, was a crucial influence on the book. Maybe the crucial influence.

MARCUS: According to our sources—okay, Wikipedia—*American Dream Machine* is being developed for Showtime. First of all, congratulations. Can you tell us how that’s going?

SPECKTOR: Well, someone needs to update my Wiki. I did write a script for *American Dream Machine* at Showtime. It was a fun process; I worked with Michael C. Hall on that and a writer named Scott Buck, whom I love. It didn’t get off the ground for whatever reason. I don’t envy the programming muck-a-mucks at the networks, trying to solve whatever puzzles they need to solve, so more recently I’ve adapted it at FX. It’s a completely different script with an altogether different narrative, characters at different ages. Both scripts diverge a bit from the novel, although they’re faithful to its spirit. Maybe it’ll go soon or maybe I’ll wind up writing a third pilot, although I’m pretty busy with other, newer things at the moment.

MARCUS: Can you say what they are?

SPECKTOR: Besides the TV stuff there’s another novel—not set in LA for the most part although it does deal with aspects of the industry—about an actor who makes a series of pretty terrible decisions. There are a couple projects I can’t talk about—a high-profile nonfiction book I’m ghostwriting, which is enjoyable, and another book about art and aesthetics that I’m editing. The thing I’m really excited about is a nonfiction book of my own about female writers and artists in the '70s and '80s. The latter in its own way is a sort of course-correction following *American Dream Machine*. I’m aware that the book—and a lot of my work, really—has a pretty strong masculine current, so I’m stoked to write a book that’s really focused on women artists and women’s sensibility. We all should be, really. To the extent I imagine a future for the movies—or for anything—that’s likely where it lies.

MARCUS: In your essay, “Lessons of Hollywood: On the Fate of Middle Class Art,” about your experiences working for Robert De Niro and Danny DeVito as director of literary acquisitions, you quote one of DeVito’s partners at Jersey Films, “a shrewd, literate woman,” as stating, “Great books make bad movies. And bad books often make great ones.” You then go on to say that “[you’ve] since heard this . . . from many sources over the years” and that “it isn’t untrue.” Can you elaborate on why that would be the case?

SPECKTOR: I suspect this bit of wisdom—“wisdom,” quote-unquote, since of course there are plenty of exceptions to prove the rule—roots itself in the number of great movies that have grown directly out of pulp. Off the top of my head: *Jaws*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Godfather*, etc. etc. etc. None of these are what you’d call great novels. A more extensive answer has to do with the fact that great novels are usually intimately involved with representations of consciousness, interior experience that is very difficult to represent visually.

Sidebar: I have a friend, the painter Rachel Kice,

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who's taken on the rather astounding project—at least to me—of painting *American Dream Machine*. I don't mean just representing the characters and scenes. I mean she's literally turning the individual words and sentences of the book into pieces of visual art, a kind of lexicon. It's a remarkable experience for me. She's just getting started—and it's likely to take a while, insofar as it's a long book—but the paintings are stunning. And it seems in many ways more truthful to me, more accurate a representation of the novel somehow, than a film or television show could ever be. It represents the more synesthetic and, by their nature, abstract aspects of fiction writing, which is precisely what I imagine gets lost in the more overt process of adaptation.

MARCUS: Your protagonist in *American Dream Machine*, talent agent Beau Rosenwald, suggests a remake of Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*. Beau's brilliant protégé turned producer, Emily White, replies that the Truffaut movie can't be improved upon and the remake should be based on the original novel, *Down There*, written by David Goodis—who of course also wrote *Dark Passage*, which was made into the noir film starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Is this something that you perchance considered in real life as a movie executive or later as a screenwriter? Outside of the obvious difference in setting—Philadelphia as opposed to Paris—how would you imagine such a film differing from the Truffaut classic? Finally, what are your thoughts, if any, on David Goodis and his work?

SPECKTOR: Ha! This is indeed something I kicked around with a producer friend, some twenty years ago. It was his idea and it was my introduction to Goodis on the page, though I'd seen *Shoot the Piano Player*. Wonderful writer, and I found him startlingly desolate. *Down There*, *Dark Passage*, and one other—off the top of my head, I don't even remember which—I read. I haven't revisited him since but I'd probably like him still more today. To be honest, that's in the novel because it seemed just the sort of idea Emily would have—she's both film literate and literature literate—and one that Beau could conceivably embrace.

MARCUS: It's fascinating to observe the way Beau bludgeons his way through a Hollywood career. He's clearly an agent with aspirations to be a producer. From your unique vantage point, do you believe this to be fairly typical? Also, how compatible in your estimation is the skill-set required for each of those professions?

SPECKTOR: Well, I'm not sure about this. Beau is an agent who becomes a producer when he washes out of the agency business. There's a difference, and I think it's typical in Hollywood—it used to be, at least, and to some extent I think it is still—that when you leave one arena you can still come back in another. A lot of agents become managers. A lot of studio executives become producers. Agents, of course, work within the structure of a corporation—ICM, CAA, whatever—whereas producers are on their own. There's probably a difference in temperament involved there. In my estimation—and, of course, I've never been an agent—I

suspect an agent is always forced to focus on the deal, where a producer has to focus on the film. That's an oversimplification, but you can see a shift in emphasis and imagine a difference in skill-set accordingly. It's tempting to say agents are sociopaths but producers are just garden variety liars.

That's a joke. I think.

MARCUS: This may be a bit like asking God what He thinks of Abraham, but if you could interview Beau today what would you want to ask him?

SPECKTOR: Ha ha! I'm afraid it might be more like asking Abraham what he thinks of God. I'm not sure I'm the boss of Beau here, but I think I'd ask him if I could try on one of his shirts—maybe if he had a wine recommendation. I don't mean in the sense of fetishizing the good life—being interested in the rich man's fancy stuff—but more in the sense of chasing the ineffable. What did it feel like to be alive in the mid-to-late 20th century? I mean, I was alive for some of it, but what did it feel like as an adult? I'd ask him the small things: What was his favorite meal? Where was his first apartment? What does he miss most from boyhood? These seem like dumb things, but the older I get myself, the more I realize that “wisdom”—whatever it is someone may have learned or things we imagine we can impart to other people—is largely useless. What counts is experience, the texture and grain of a life. And now more than ever—now that so much of the world feels synthetic, corporate, mediated by screens and other technologies—the very coarseness and the weird humility of a life like Beau's has such appeal. What did it feel like to be a person who spoke his own mind? Who even had a mind to speak.

MARCUS: One of the most ironic and poignant scenes in your book occurs when Beau approaches a movie mogul in a restaurant in order to “confirm his own status,” which ultimately leads to devastating consequences. Would it be possible to describe how you came up with the idea for that encounter?

SPECKTOR: As with most, there was a combination of ingredients. I needed Beau to destroy himself without knowing he was doing it. I needed a benign social interaction—seemingly benign—that would have consequences. This seemed a plausible way to do it. On a more intimate level, this scene happens at a restaurant by the beach, a place I've been to many times with my parents on Sunday evenings. It seems trivial, but I wanted to capture that place, that moment, and that mood. If the scene is poignant, it may gain in that regard from my consciousness that this is a place I'll someday miss. It's sort of a predictive version of the Hamburger Hamlet scene at the beginning.

MARCUS: Your father, Fred Specktor, was an agent for William Morris and then CAA, where he's still active. How much shop talk would you say you were exposed to growing up?

SPECKTOR: A lot. And yet it's amazing how little of it I

paid attention to, if only because industry shop talk is like every other kind—of interest mostly to the people who work in the shop. There's stuff in the book that was overheard—that ludicrous misunderstanding Beau has at the end regarding the film *Gandhi*, which proves so instrumental in determining his fate, is taken from something I overheard—but most of the shop talk here is invented. I wish I could remember half the things I must've overheard when I was a kid. I'm sure they'd be a lot more interesting to me now.

MARCUS: What were some of your favorite films and television shows at that time? What genres? And what about today?

SPECKTOR: Hoo-boy. When I was a kid I was, predictably, obsessed with everything the Z Channel brought into my living room. *The Sting*. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. *Sleeper*. *Bananas*. When I got a little older, things that were inappropriate—sometimes wildly so—but eye-opening: *A Clockwork Orange*. *The Deer Hunter*. *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Really, a '70s childhood in that respect. When I was a teenager, I had a film teacher in high school, the legendary Jim Hosney, who opened my eyes to all sorts of things: Godard. Buñuel. Antonioni. Truffaut. It's fair to say my tastes haven't changed all that much. They've expanded, mostly backwards in time—Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray, and so on—but they're anchored, firmly, in the Golden Age as defined inside the novel.

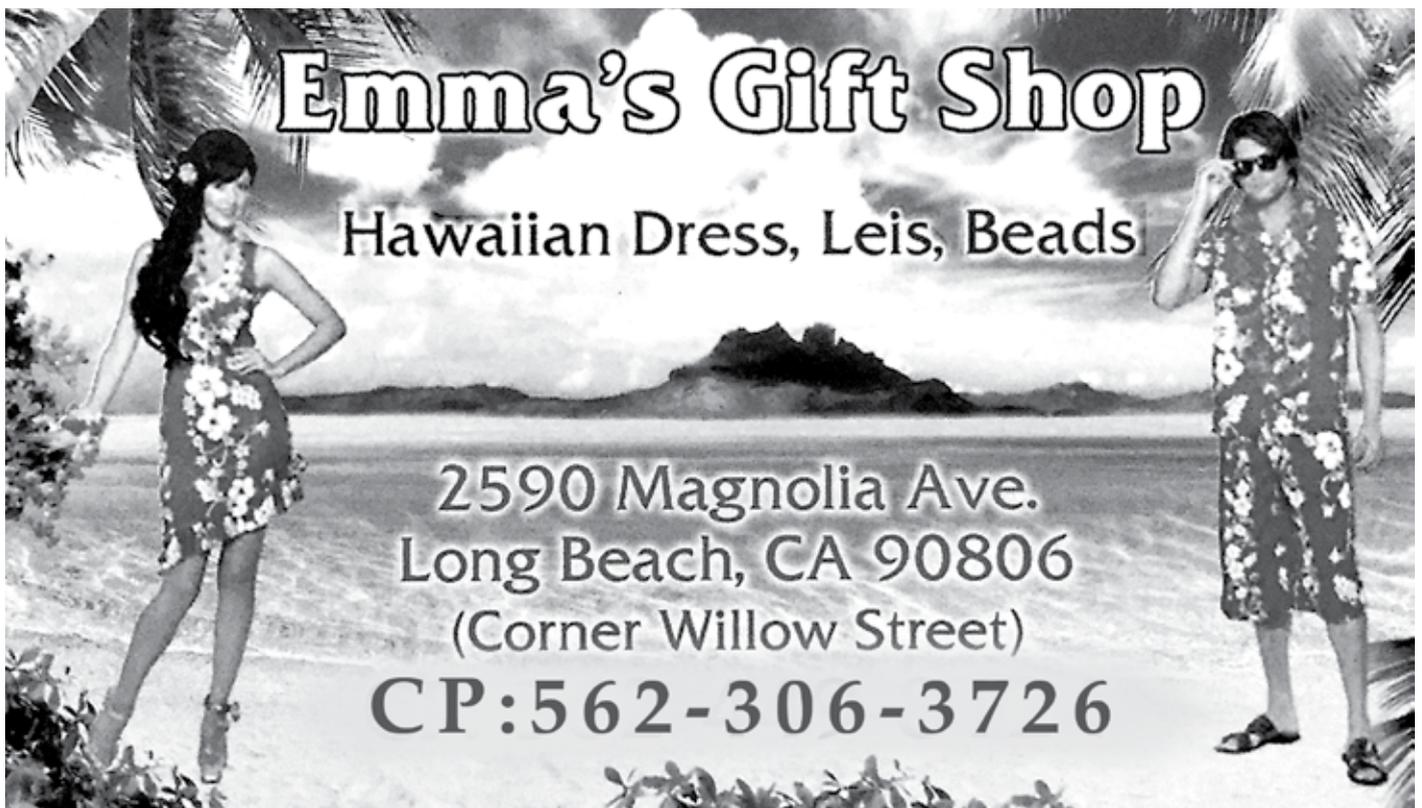
Where TV is concerned, I'm equally predictable. I watched less of it than most of my peers growing up. I was too consumed by books, rock 'n' roll, and films—in that order—to spend much time on the living room rug. But more recently? *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *Six Feet*

Under, *The Shield*, etc. etc. The seminal hour-long dramas we all know and most of us love. At the moment, *Fargo* and *The Deuce* have my attention. I don't go to the movies all that often anymore, to be honest. That's not to say I don't like, say, Paul Thomas Anderson's movies as much as the next person. I do, more or less. But they don't feel quite as urgent, as necessary to me as films once did.

MARCUS: Which screenwriters and directors do you admire most? Do you have a candidate—or candidates—for the Great American Film?

SPECKTOR: I'll stay within my '70s sweet spot and say I spend a lot of time with Altman. It's hard to think of a better brace of films than, say, *The Long Goodbye*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and *Nashville*, to say nothing of *California Split*, *Three Women*, etc. I feel similarly about Coppola's run from '72 to '79. I will never get enough of Bob Towne's *Chinatown* script or Chayefsky's *Network*. It's ridiculous—impossible—to try to boil this down to a list of screenwriters and directors I admire, let alone a candidate for a single Great American Film. I realize these are all sorts of major-key choices, but I would be negligent not to make them all the same. If there's a particular film, or a filmmaker I think should be much more widely appreciated, I'd say it would be Charles Burnett for *Killer of Sheep* and just about everything else—not nearly enough—I've seen that's followed it. In a perfect world that man would be allowed to make any movie he wanted until the end of time. He's a giant.

MARCUS: And now for a really important question. What do you think of the direction the Bond films have taken in recent years, the most recent, of course, being *Spectre*? And



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would you care to weigh in on Daniel Craig?

SPECKTOR: Thank God you asked. *Casino Royale* is the best Bond movie since the first one, arguably better. Craig is the best Bond since . . . well, one loves them all for different reasons, right? Pitting them against each other is a bit like *steak au poivre* vs. Hollandaise sauce, y’know? I guess Timothy Dalton was a little naff, but I have a soft spot for Pierce Brosnan for many reasons. During the ‘90s—and I believe still, although I’d have to check—Pierce was a client of my father’s, and it was my dad, in fact, who negotiated those movies for him. There was a moment, if I recall correctly, when BMW used Pierce’s likeness in an advertisement without asking permission and my father, as his agent, picked up the phone to give them hell. It was a small transgression, it may have been little more than a discourtesy—I’m not sure—but like Beau my dad had a bit of a reputation for being the kind of agent you didn’t want to hear from if he was angry, so, uh, the folks at BMW probably weren’t thrilled to be dealing with him. This was right around the time I was moving back to LA from New York. I arrived with my then-fiancée and we were staying at my dad’s for a few days while we were looking for an apartment, a car, and so on. It happened that a beautiful automobile—an E36 M3, which was the high-performance BMW they were just beginning to import into the U.S.—showed up in the driveway one morning. It wasn’t quite as sleek as the car Bond was driving in *Tomorrow Never Dies*, but it was close. And, y’know, I desperately needed a way to get around town for a few days while I was hunting for a vehicle I could afford.

It was never entirely clear to me whether that car was an apology, a thank you, or if my father had simply agented them with the same savvy he did everybody else. I do know that for a week or so I drove that car about as recklessly as I’ve ever done anything in my life. I’ll never be James Bond myself, but it was nice of him, effectively, to let me drive his car. Now if I could only get my hands on an Aston Martin . . .

O’KANE: Matthew, we talked about LA novelists and you mentioned Bret Ellis. He’s from LA but really doesn’t write about LA—at least in the few books I’ve read. Aldous Huxley is from the UK and has a couple novels set in LA. *Island* is one of my favorite books. Nathanael West is obviously an LA novelist. John Fante came from Colorado but stayed here his whole life and wrote about it. BUK, Charles Bukowski, fits but clearly in an idiom at odds with much of the canon, though he liked Fante. Ellis definitely seems like a big influence on you. This isn’t quite a question! It’s on the way. . .

SPECKTOR: It’s funny. I was pretty circumspect about not reading certain LA novelists—or not reading too much of them—until fairly late in life, in some cases, until I’d already written . . . or started writing *American Dream Machine*. I’d read Chandler, I’d read Didion, I’d read Nathanael West and late Fitzgerald because who hasn’t? But I hadn’t absorbed them in a way you’d consider them to be “influences,” as fine as all of them are. My influences were largely East Coast and predominately Jewish—Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, James Salter. My friendly peers and writerly neighbors were

similarly so: Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, etc. This perhaps disappointingly masculine posse was leavened by an obsessive reading of a number of others who certainly write a lot better than I’ll ever be able to. Shirley Hazzard, Renata Adler, Elizabeth Bowen were all writers I read relentlessly, even if their influence is probably harder to detect in this particular book. And James Baldwin, who was my undergraduate professor and who pointed me to, among other things, Henry James. Put those things together and you probably arrive at the crucible in which *American Dream Machine* was forged.

I love Bret Ellis’s fiction, and there’s probably not an Angeleno my age alive who wasn’t affected by *Less Than Zero* when it came out. He and I grew up at approximately the same time and he described the world in which I came of age better than anyone. Indeed, he may have been the only person who described it at all. I think the subsequent run of novels from *American Psycho* to *Lunar Park* is exemplary. Those are incredible books, although not in any way confined to Los Angeles. At the same time, I don’t think I can say he’s an influence. His work occupies its own sphere, a tonal and moral world that’s a bit different. As with Steve Erickson, or Bruce Wagner or Kate Braverman or Michael Tolkin . . . or Carolyn See or Eve Babitz or Joan Didion or Walter Mosley, it was impossible to write and not be conscious of the Los Angeles he’d created. But this is a big city and I was looking out a window a few miles—maybe a freeway overpass or two—away.

O’KANE: The comments you made earlier about movies and arithmetic in relation to a cultural shift in Hollywood made me think of Aldous Huxley’s great LA futurist novel *Ape and Essence*, written in 1948 and set in 2120. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with it. The story is framed around two characters wandering through a studio lot who see some rejected scripts fall off a truck on the way to the incinerator. They pick up one which turns out to be brilliant. Most of Huxley’s book consists of this script, an avant-garde art film that in its structure and content mocks the simple linear story and the mentalities of the masses that support the system that produces this kind of entertainment. Of course, we did see the development of indie films in the ‘50s following the Paramount antitrust decision in 1947. This renaissance continued through the ‘60s and into the ‘70s, producing a sort of parallel Hollywood. Could you say that what you chronicle in *American Dream Machine* is the final demise of this indie era?

SPECKTOR: The optimist in me would like to say it isn’t, but I think we all understand—don’t we?—that movies as we’ve known them aren’t coming back. Film was *the* dominant 20th century art form. It feels ridiculous to speak of it in past tense. Of course there will continue to be movies as there are still books, paintings, jazz combos, poems, and so on. But none of those art forms are culturally dominant anymore either. Which doesn’t make them less alive; it only makes them slightly peripheral. Movies aren’t yet, but they are bloated, expensive, hyperbolic. I’m talking about studio movies, mind you. I’m well aware that there are other kinds.

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I think it's probably true that the movies' reliance on that linear quality Huxley critiques is part of what's killed them. A friend of mine, a very successful director, said to me recently that the problem with movies is that we've run out of myths. I'd say that's half true. I think the real problem is that the imperatives and pressures provided by capitalism and technology—forces that are not entirely separable—have wrecked so many things: our attention spans, the economy, any real hope of adequate recompense for artists—not that that hasn't always been an issue. Movies are collapsing under these pressures and I'm pretty sure they won't be back as a culturally pertinent art form, emphasis on "art." The good news is . . . there'll be something else. People need art. The so-called golden age of television we're presently living through is proof of that. And I suspect it's a stopgap but there'll be something else, unsuspected.

O'KANE: We discussed the issue of literary novels versus the commercial genre and the reality that five percent of the market now—perhaps less—is reserved for the literary variety, the type that converges possibly with the European novel. Practitioners like Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace seem to be very scarce. This might have something to do with the literacy level of the country. But could it also have something to do with the system of production? The economic pressures that have driven the studios to trivialize and package formulas—their highly concentrated conglomeration that bottom-lines to the extreme—seem to be in play with respect to book publishers too. And the same companies

seem to own both. The latter have clearly restricted the types of books that can be published, ironically contributing to the literacy problem! Might a more diversified, competitive system more effectively represent the demand for literary product presently being denied?

Also, where do you see your writing in relation to this structure, having written an excellent novel about the film industry and as a novelist committed to revitalizing the literary novel with new content and form . . . and possibly as one who is identified with the LA literary scene and culture, often denigrated in relation to the East?

SPECKTOR: Good questions. I would say yes, for sure, the contemporary literary landscape—the *mainstream* literary landscape—has been flattened out in much the same way the landscape of film has, and for many of the same reasons. HarperCollins and 20th Century Fox—or do we say 21st Century Fox now?—are owned by the same parent corporation. Each of the Big Five houses is owned by a multinational company. It would be ridiculous to pretend this doesn't affect things. The forces described in *American Dream Machine* are applicable in every branch of media, in sports, in the music business . . . pretty much everywhere. At the same time, there are an exceptional number of independent publishing houses doing stellar work. There are larger ones, like Graywolf or Tin House or Counterpoint Press or Coffee House and there are smaller ones, like Unnamed Press or Civil Coping Mechanisms or Stalking Horse. Really, there are so many vibrant independent publishing houses in the

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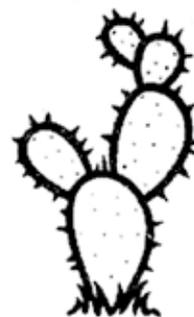
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U.S. at the moment—places with as strong and bold a sensibility as one could ever dare to hope for—that it’s simply a mistake to imagine there doesn’t already exist a “more diversified, competitive system.” There does! The only thing these houses lack is the kind of monolithic fiscal advantage and the advertising muscle enjoyed by multinational conglomerates. Would it be better for literary culture if this particular playing field were leveled? Hell, yeah. It’s like every other kind of wealth inequality in this respect.

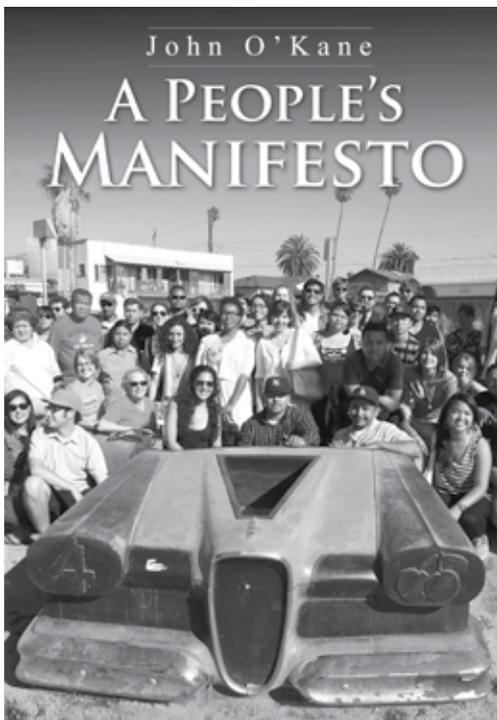
It’s not necessarily for me to say where my writing fits inside that structure, or any other. I like to think it’s the structure’s job, generally, to learn how to contend with the writer and not the writer’s job to accommodate the existing structure. It’s also not my job to talk about “revitalizing the novel” in 2017. That said, I think any decent work of art is intent on revitalizing and expanding its form. That’s what good books do, in both large and small ways. I was hell-bent on writing a book about Los Angeles—about its glossy, hedonistic, frequently derided and fetishized Hollywood

aspect—that would be merely human. I wanted to write about LA the way Balzac did about Paris or Philip Roth did about New Jersey or Michael Ondaatje did about Sri Lanka—as a place that was worthy of a sort of ordinary attention, an arena for normal life instead of some soul-sucking vacuum. That book didn’t seem to exist. Perhaps it still doesn’t, but I tried.

I love this place. I have every intention of writing about it again. Why wouldn’t I? It’s an article of obsession for me, the way Monet’s haystacks or Brian Wilson’s stacked harmonies or Bo Diddley’s drumbeat must’ve seemed to them. There’s plenty of room to stretch outside it, but almost anything one could wish to imagine is right here.

Dan Marcus is a screenwriter, playwright, and songwriter. He is the co-writer of six stage musicals produced in the Philippines and LA, respectively. Various artists have performed and recorded his compositions, which have also appeared in movies and on television. His songs “The Existential Banana Peel” and “Sometimes I Feel Like Richard Nixon” are scheduled for spring release.

Publisher of *AMASS* Magazine Releases *A People’s Manifesto*



A People’s Manifesto, by John O’Kane, editor and publisher of *AMASS* Magazine, is a new book just published by SPD Books. It focuses on the opinions and perspectives of the people, ordinary citizens, non-experts, outsiders, those without influence, about the state of American society over the past several years, especially since the Great Recession of 2008. More specifically, the author engages in a series of conversations with a diverse number of people from varying backgrounds on the issues: the economy and jobs, political polarization, campaign reform, the elite domination of political life, the Tea Party phenomenon, inequality, immigration, austerity and the ongoing budget crises, and foreclosures, among others.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part compiles these conversations in an easy-to-grasp journalistic style, at times reading like a novel. All of the conversations are with enlightened Long Beach citizens from differing lifestyles and political orientations. A significant part of these conversations includes a focus on Occupy Long Beach and its efforts to raise awareness about these issues above, as well as its relation to other activists in the area from a wide spectrum of age groups. The cover is a photo taken at Cherry and 4th streets of a group of local activists ranged around the remains of an Edsel (taken by long-time Long Beach photographer Slobodan Dimitrov). The second is a sampling of op-ed pieces from Huffingtonpost and other publications over the course of the past six years or so about the issues that the citizens in part one discuss and react to. These are in chronological order

and in response to the post-recession crisis as it evolved, and mostly left in their original form.

The book’s tone and substance are shaped by a striking irony. Populism is all the rage these days. Bloggers and journalists from across the political spectrum are obsessed with speaking for the people, citizens who have become victims of the Great Recession of 2008. But these very-same citizens can rarely speak for themselves. One of the quite remarkable insights to come from all this is that citizens without access to insider “facts” can make sense of these times and pass along knowledge—not mere information—that motivate others to learn and act. And they can express their opinions through a variety of venues, especially op-ed writing.

The book is 200 pages long, and priced at \$24.95. It can be purchased at all fine bookstores, as well as online at Amazon and other sites.

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REGULATION IS KILLING COMMUNITY BANKS

E L L E N B R O W N

At his confirmation hearing in January 2017, Treasury Secretary Stephen Mnuchin said, “regulation is killing community banks.” If the process is not reversed, he warned, we could “end up in a world where we have four big banks in this country.” That would be bad for both jobs and the economy. “I think that we all appreciate the engine of growth is with small and medium-sized businesses,” said Mnuchin. “We’re losing the ability for small and medium-sized banks to make good loans to small and medium-sized businesses in the community, where they understand those credit risks better than anybody else.”

The number of US banks with assets under \$100 million dropped from 13,000 in 1995 to under 1,900 in 2014. The regulatory burden imposed by the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act exacerbated this trend, with community banks losing market share at double the rate during the four years after 2010 as in the four years before. But the number had already dropped to only 2,625 in 2010. What happened between 1995 and 2010?

Six weeks after September 11, 2001, the 1,100 page Patriot Act was dropped on congressional legislators, who were required to vote on it the next day. The Patriot Act added provisions to the 1970 Bank Secrecy Act that not only expanded the federal government’s wiretapping and surveillance powers but outlawed the funding of terrorism, imposing greater scrutiny on banks and stiff criminal penalties for non-compliance. Banks must now collect and verify customer-provided information, check names of customers against lists of

known or suspected terrorists, determine risk levels posed by customers, and report suspicious persons, organizations and transactions. One small banker complained that banks have been turned into spies secretly reporting to the federal government. If they fail to comply, they can face stiff enforcement actions, whether or not actual money-laundering crimes are alleged.

In 2010, one small New Jersey bank pleaded guilty to conspiracy to violate the Bank Secrecy Act and was fined \$5 million for failure to file suspicious-activity and cash-transaction reports. The bank was acquired a few months later by another bank. Another small New Jersey bank was ordered to shut down a large international wire transfer business because of deficiencies in monitoring for suspicious transactions. It closed its doors after it was hit with \$8 million in fines over its inadequate monitoring policies.

**Killing off the
community banks
with regulation
means killing off
the small and medium-size
businesses that
rely on them for funding,
along with the local
economies
that rely
on those
businesses.**

– Ellen Brown

Complying with the new rules demands a level of technical expertise not available to ordinary mortals, requiring the hiring of yet more specialized staff and buying more anti-laundering software. Small banks cannot afford the risk of massive fines or the added staff needed to avoid them, and that burden is getting worse. In February 2017, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network proposed a new rule that would add a new category requiring the flagging of suspicious “cyberevents.” According to an April 2017 article in *American Banker*: “The ‘cyberevent’ category requires institutions to detect and report all varieties of digital mischief, whether directed at a customer’s account or at the bank itself. . . .”

Under a worst-case scenario, a bank’s failure to detect a suspicious [email] attachment or a phishing attack could theoretically result in criminal prosecution, massive fines and additional oversight. One large bank estimated that the proposed change with the new cyberevent reporting requirement would cost it an additional \$9.6 million every year.

Besides the cost of hiring an army of compliance officers to deal with a thousand pages of regulations, banks have been hit with increased capital requirements imposed



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by the Financial Stability Board under Basel III, eliminating the smaller banks' profit margins. They have little recourse but to sell to the larger banks, which have large compliance departments and can skirt the capital requirements by parking assets in off-balance-sheet vehicles.

In a September 2014 article titled "The FDIC's New Capital Rules and Their Expected Impact on Community Banks," Richard Morris and Monica Reyes Grajales noted that "a full discussion of the rules would resemble an advanced course in calculus," and that the regulators have ignored protests that the rules would have a devastating impact on community banks. Why? The authors suggested that the rules reflect "the new vision of bank regulation – that there should be bigger and fewer banks in the industry." That means bank consolidation is an intended result of the punishing rules.

House Financial Services Committee Chairman Jeb Hensarling, sponsor of the Financial CHOICE Act downsizing Dodd-Frank, concurs. In a speech in July 2015, he said: "Since the passage of Dodd-Frank, the big banks are bigger and the small banks are fewer. But because Washington can control a handful of big established firms much easier than many small and zealous competitors, *this is likely an intended consequence of the Act*. Dodd-Frank concentrates greater assets in fewer institutions. It codifies into law 'Too Big to Fail'..."

Dodd-Frank institutionalizes "too big to fail" by authorizing the biggest banks to "bail in" or confiscate their creditors' money in the event of insolvency. The legislation ostensibly reining in the too-big-to-fail banks has just made them bigger. Wall Street lobbyists were well known to have their fingerprints all over Dodd-Frank.

The Model of North Dakota

Killing off the community banks with regulation means killing off the small and medium-size businesses that rely on them for funding, along with the local economies that rely on those businesses. Community banks service local markets in a way that the megabanks with their standardized lending models are not interested in or capable of.

How can the community banks be preserved and nurtured? For some ideas, we can look to a state where they are still thriving – North Dakota. In an article titled "How One State Escaped Wall Street's Rule and Created a Banking System That's 83% Locally Owned," Stacy Mitchell writes that North Dakota's banking sector bears little resemblance to that of the rest of the country:

"With 89 small and mid-sized community banks and 38 credit unions, North Dakota has six times as many locally owned financial institutions per person as the rest of the nation. And these local banks and credit unions control a resounding 83 percent of deposits in the state — more than twice the 30 percent market share that small and mid-sized financial institutions have nationally."

Their secret is the century-old Bank of North Dakota (BND), the nation's only state-owned depository bank, which partners with and supports the state's local banks. In an April 2015 article titled "Is Dodd-Frank

Killing Community Banks? The More Important Question is How to Save Them," Matt Stannard writes:

"Public banks offer unique benefits to community banks, including collateralization of deposits, protection from poaching of customers by big banks, the creation of more successful deals, and . . . regulatory compliance. The Bank of North Dakota, the nation's only public bank, directly supports community banks and enables them to meet regulatory requirements such as asset to loan ratios and deposit to loan ratios. . . . [I]t keeps community banks solvent in other ways, lessening the impact of regulatory compliance on banks' bottom lines."

We know from FDIC data in 2009 that North Dakota had almost 16 banks per 100,000 people, the most in the country. A more important figure, however, is community banks' loan averages per capita, which was \$12,000 in North Dakota, compared to only \$3,000 nationally. . . . During the last decade, banks in North Dakota with less than \$1 billion in assets have averaged a stunning 434 percent more small business lending than the national average.

The BND has been very profitable for the state and its citizens – more profitable, according to the Wall Street Journal, than JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs. The BND does not compete with local banks but partners with them, helping with capitalization and liquidity and allowing them to take on larger loans that would otherwise go to larger out-of-state banks.

In order to help rural lenders with regulatory compliance, in 2011 the BND was directed by the state legislature to get into the rural home mortgage origination business. Rural banks that saw only three to five mortgages a year could not shoulder the regulatory burden, leading to business lost to out-of-state banks. After a successful pilot program, SB 2064, establishing the Mortgage Origination Program, was signed by North Dakota's governor on April 3, 2013. It states that the BND may establish a residential mortgage loan program under which the Bank may originate residential mortgages if private sector mortgage loan services are not reasonably available. Under this program a local financial institution or credit union may assist the Bank in taking a loan application, gathering required documents, ordering required legal documents, and maintaining contact with the borrower. At a hearing on the bill, Rick Clayburgh, President of the North Dakota Bankers Association, testified in its support:

"Over the past years because of the regulatory burdens our banks face by the passage of Dodd-Frank, and now the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, it has become very prohibitive for a number of our banks to provide residential mortgage services anymore. We two years ago worked both with the Independent Community Bankers Association, and our Association and the Bank of North Dakota to come up with the idea in this program to help the bank provide services into the parts of the state that really residential mortgaging has seized up. We have a number of our banks that have terminated doing mortgage loans in their communities. They have stopped the process because they cannot afford to be written up by

their regulator.”

Under the Mortgage Origination Program, local banks get paid what is essentially a finder’s fee for sending rural mortgage loans to the BND. If the BND touches the money first, the onus is on it to deal with the regulators, something it can afford to do by capitalizing on economies of scale. The local bank thus avoids having to deal with regulatory compliance while keeping its customer.

The BND is the only model of a publicly-owned depository bank in the US; but in Germany, the publicly-owned Sparkassen banks operate a network of over 15,600 branches and are the financial backbone supporting Germany’s strong local business sector. In the matter of regulatory compliance, they too capitalize on economies of scale, by providing a compliance department that pools

resources to deal with the onerous regulations imposed on banks by the EU.

The BND and the Sparkassen are proven models for maintaining the viability of local credit and banking services. It is time other states followed North Dakota’s lead, not only to protect their local communities and local banks, but to bolster their revenues, escape the noose of Washington and Wall Street, and provide a bail-in-proof depository for their public funds.

Ellen Brown is an attorney, founder of the Public Banking Institute, a Senior Fellow of the Democracy Collaborative, and author of twelve books. Her new book, *The Coming Revolution in Banking*, is due out this winter. EllenBrown.com.





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Last week saw a flurry of humiliating pitches by North American cities for Amazon to pick them as the location of the corporation's second headquarters.

New Jersey committed a phenomenal \$7 billion in tax breaks if picked. Stonecrest, Georgia, pledged to annex 345 acres to create an entire city called Amazon and make CEO Jeff Bezos unelected mayor. Tucson sent a 21-foot cactus to Amazon, which the company rejected.

Meanwhile in Canada, Calgary released a deeply cringey video, bought a massive billboard in Seattle claiming that it would "fight a bear" for Amazon and paid for sidewalk graffiti that joked about how it would also change its name for it. NHL teams in Calgary and Ottawa led arena-wide chants pleading for the company to pick them. Winnipeg bragged in its application that it was the inspiration for Winnie the Pooh's name.

In total, more 100 cities submitted applications, including Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal, Sault Ste. Marie, Halifax, Hamilton and Toronto.

This is the near-dystopian endpoint of the neoliberal city: gargantuan corporations forcing cash-strapped cities to publicly bid against each other with tax breaks, subsidies and crass public relations campaigns. In the excellently titled "Amazon's New Headquarters Should Be In Hell," author Hamilton Nolan argued: "This is what the extortion of public resources looks like."

And the only solution is reasserting our collective right to the city.

Subsidies, Tax Breaks & Gentrification

Let's take a look at what Amazon is actually asking for in its glorified job posting.

Firstly, the proposed location has to be close to an international airport, major highways and have "direct access to rail, train, subway/metro, bus routes." It also has

to have a massive amount of space: over 500,000 square feet for the facility by 2019, up to 8,000,000 square feet by 2027. There must be a "highly educated labor pool," a "compatible cultural and community environment" and an "overall high quality of life."

All of those things require historically significant government resources, including infrastructure, public transit and post-secondary education: things that Amazon assumes the automatic right to without having to pay for in exchange for the privilege of the corporate behemoth in your backyard.

Amazon's presence in a city will also inevitably lead to massive gentrification and displacement of primarily low-income Black, Indigenous and people of color from urban areas, as has already happened in Seattle.

Then there are the demands for a "stable and business-friendly environment and tax structure" — AKA low corporate tax rates without threat of change — and a wide range of incentives including tax credits/exemptions, relocation grants, workforce grants, utility grants and fee reductions.

This is a textbook "race to the bottom" situation, in which governments are expected to commit massive public funds to subsidize a for-profit corporation so it doesn't lose the "opportunity" to another jurisdiction.

As the managing director of Invest Ottawa put it to CBC News, cities in the U.S. are "going to go hard at this one — they're going to put serious cash on the table."

That's right: serious cash for a half-trillion company led by one of the richest men in the world,

who stations ambulances outside of warehouses instead of providing air conditioning because it was cheaper.

An associated irony is that every dollar spent in the form of tax breaks and subsidies is a dollar that can't be spent on things like public housing and mass transit. That matters a great deal given that "the costs of tax breaks for the city will far outweigh whatever benefits come from the number of jobs created," as Margaret O'Mara put it in an interview with GeekWire.

Cities Hamstrung by Revenue and PR Pressures

Of course, it's not like the Amazon bid is new. Rapacious corporations have spent decades blackmailing

This is the near-dystopian endpoint of the neoliberal city: gargantuan corporations forcing cash-strapped cities to publicly bid against each other with tax breaks, subsidies and crass public relations campaigns.

— James Wilt

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governments for handouts. But this is surely one of the most brazen examples that we've seen. And as one of the most powerful companies in the world, Amazon could set an even worse precedent for cities going forward.

The fundamental reason that cities across the continent are debasing themselves for Amazon is that they're woefully underfunded and straitjacketed by incessant capitalist propaganda.

It's estimated that Canadian cities only receive eight cents of every tax dollar. Yet they provide a large chunk of services and own most public capital stock in the country. They're also forced to rely on a politically toxic combo of property taxes and user fees, augmented by ad-hoc grants and funding arrangements from higher levels of government (especially when it's election season).

Throw in grotesque public relations campaigns by far-right astroturf groups like the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and it makes it very difficult for a municipality to actually do its job of building and operating a city.

In turn, that represents an utter inability to launch massive job programs to build and operate public housing, mass transit, building retrofits, renewable electricity or climate adaptation infrastructure. Sure, cities could beg for handouts from higher levels of capitalist governments, but it's very unlikely to happen in this era of cynical deficit politics, downloading austerity and refusal to even

legislate municipalities as autonomous entities.

There's only one way out of this hellscape: a fierce re-commitment to the "right to the city."

Democracy Without Elections

This does not mean dedicating enormous time and resources to get leftist candidates elected to municipal councils.

There's perhaps a place for that in some contexts: Seattle's socialist city council member Kshama Sawant has been a fervent critic of Amazon's impacts, and veteran anti-poverty organizer Jean Swanson would have been an invaluable addition to Vancouver's city council if she'd won.

But the promise of truly leftist and democratic city-building that can challenge the powers of Amazon and other multi-nationals is much more than electoral politicking, which is almost always poisoned with money and influence from sectors like finance and real estate.

In the words of journalist Debbie Bookchin, daughter of the late Murray Bookchin:

"Municipalism demands that we return power to ordinary citizens, that we reinvent what it means to do politics and what it means to be a citizen. True politics is the opposite of parliamentary politics. It begins at the base, in local assemblies."

That largely parallels the concept of the "right to the city," originally coined by Henri Lefebvre and

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explained by geographer David Harvey:

Greater democratic control over the production and utilization of the surplus. Since the urban process is a major channel of surplus use, establishing democratic management over its urban deployment constitutes the right to the city.”

Rejecting Amazon for People Power

Think the Paris Commune, revolutionary Catalonia, Zapatista-controlled Chiapas, autonomous Kurdistan or the 1968 uprisings in France.

Granted, these are all extremely intimidating examples. Many of them were also brutally crushed by the state. But they hold the keys to what a municipal future would look like that can actually build serious alternatives to vulturous multinationals picking at the fiscal scraps offered up by desperate cities.

They can start small, like New Orleans’ Common Ground Collective founded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina or the recent Parkdale rent strike in Toronto that beat back slumlords from spiking rent prices.

The statement released after the Parkdale victory included the declaration: “We are prepared to take up the struggles of all working class people in our neighborhood whether around housing, education, employment, or any other area of our lives. By continuing to organize, we will become stronger and build our power in Parkdale.”

That’s how a community is united. That’s how a

city is won.

And that’s how Amazon and every other predatory corporation will be resisted: by the power of the people coming together and imagining a better world in which we control the means of production and distribution, and render ghoulish companies obsolete.

James Wilt is a freelance journalist based in Winnipeg and writes in *VICE*, *Canadian Dimension* and other publications.



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PUBLIC POWER AND ENERGY DEMOCRACY

JOANNA BOZUWA

Asthma rates are so bad from the toxic emissions that many students cannot make it through gym class without their inhalers. Cancer and infant mortality rates in the area are through the roof.

These plants are owned by some of the biggest names in the utility business including groups like Duke Energy and AEP. Gibson Power Plant, the worst of them all, emits 2.9 million pounds of toxic compounds and 16.3 million metric tons of greenhouse gases a year. What's more, most of the energy generated in these plants is transported out of state, leaving Indiana with all the emissions and very little gain.

Indiana's power plants provide a window into how our current electrical system works. It is a system dominated by a small number of large powerful companies, called investor-owned utilities. Their centralized fossil fuel plants are at the heart of our aging electricity grid—a core contributor to rapidly-accelerating climate change.

The carbon emissions associated with these power providers are but one symptom of larger systemic issues in the sector. Investor-owned utilities are traditionally profit-oriented corporations whose structures are based on a paradigm of extraction. Following the path of least resistance, they often burden communities who do not have the political or financial capital to object with the impacts of their fossil fuel infrastructure. For example, the NAACP reported in *Coal Blooded*, that residents living within 3 miles of a coal plant were more likely to earn a below average annual income and be a person of color. Similar statistics have been recorded for natural gas infrastructure. Just like in Indiana, living next to such pollution hotspots has instigated widespread health effects like asthma and cancer, hitting residents with high medical bills and more sick days.

Discriminatory health care and inflexible work further spiral communities into hardship.

These utilities are in a moment of existential crisis with the rise of renewables, though. Every solar panel installed eats away at their centralized, fossil fuel production—sending utilities and their traditional business model into a proclaimed death spiral. From gas pipelines to coal power plants, their investments are turning into stranded assets. In an attempt to slow the transition they've thrown their weight behind campaigns to stymie the growing renewables sector.

In some ways it feels as if they're doubling down on fossil fuels. The drop in natural gas prices has led many investor-owned utilities to continue to build infrastructure like pipelines, often through nefarious self-deals that their rate-payers have little to no say in. Yet, rate-payers' electricity bills will rise for projects whose use must be obsolete, soon to stay below 1.5 degrees warming.

Eliminating fossil fuels from the energy mix is paramount to creating healthy communities and stemming climate change.

– Joanna Bozuwa

Ironically, utilities justify their advocacy for fossil fuels as a strategy to ensure affordable rates. For instance, they argue that net-metering policies for renewables increase rates for low income residents, as grid maintenance costs are shifted onto those who don't have rooftop solar. This analysis has been thoroughly debunked. First, it refuses to acknowledge the true costs of fossil fuels—from health effects to environmental damage. Second, it glazes over the subsidies that prop up fossil fuels and continue to make them cheap, but horrible investments.

Equitable Renewables through Public Power

Justifying fossil fuels for low income households is highly flawed and inadmissible, but it does pose an important question: Who is reaping the benefits of renewables right now? How do we ensure that we are creating a more equitable energy system, decided by and for its community members?

Eliminating fossil fuels from the energy mix is paramount to creating healthy communities and stemming climate change. Low income households have much to gain from the renewable transition in part because they often have disproportionately higher bills due to older and less energy efficient homes. Yet, they are more likely to rent and have lower credit scores, precluding them from many of the renewable installation incentives.

“Energy Democracy” is a concept that was developed as a solution not only to solve climate change, but also to address these entrenched systemic inequities. It is a vision to restructure the energy future based on inclusive engagement, where genuine participation in democratic processes provides community control and renewable energy generates equitably distributed, local wealth. A combination of strategies has been deployed around the globe to work towards energy democracy.

One such strategy is making utilities public entities in a hope to democratize the decision-making process and eliminate the overriding goal of profit maximization. This allows communities to more effectively demand moves away from fossil fuels and hold the utility accountable if it doesn't. Fed up with investor-owned utilities' inability to transition to equitable renewables, campaigns for public utilities are making huge strides in cities from Hamburg, Germany to Boulder, Colorado.

Publicly owned utilities are controlled by local government. Without the pressures of shareholder profit, they attempt to optimize benefits for their local customers who double as their owners and decision makers. Any profits they do make are given back to the local government: according to the American Public Power Association, public utilities pay 33% more back to the community they serve. There are already over 2,000 public power utilities in the United States and, although public power utilities tend to serve smaller constituencies, cities as large as Los Angeles rely on them for their electricity needs. The entire state of Nebraska is run on public power.

Hurdles to Public Power

That being said, the majority of public power utilities still rely predominantly on fossil fuels. Seventy three percent of their electric generating capacity comes from fossil fuels, slightly less than the 79% of investor-owned utilities. Much like investor-owned utilities, they also have investments in traditional fossil fuel infrastructure, making the transition a struggle. The difference here is that the community has a larger potential to shift energy provision. The question remains: is it being taken?

They are also not immune to rate scandals. City-owned Cleveland Public Power recently came under fire for their dubious charges on electricity bills. “Ecological adjustments” increased rates and were obscured on customers' bills in order to take care of holes in the utility's budget. Their actions, although unacceptable, were in some measure because they were feeling the heat from a private utility, First-Energy, vying for the same customer base.

The ability for public power to provide energy democracy is in part determined by the policy landscape they operate within. In the case of Ohio, Cleveland Public Power was in direct competition with a private utility because the state has liberalized its grid. Liberalized electricity markets are deregulated to increase competition and allow customers choice in their electricity provider. It also means that electricity generation, transmission, and distribution are spliced into different markets. In other states, energy utilities are vertically-integrated, regulated monopolies. This means

they own the majority of the operations associated with the electricity market and provide for all of the customers in a particular region. *To date, there is little research that has been done on how these different contexts affect publicly owned utilities and their ability to foster energy democracy.*

Investor-owned utilities have a hand in that important policy making; they wield significant political influence and state regulators repeatedly cater to their wants. For example, Dominion Power, an investor-owned utility, is one of the largest forces in Virginian politics and has a serious agenda to continue the fossil fuel era.

Continued Research

There seems to be great opportunity in reclaiming power to the public sphere—with examples like Hamburg and Boulder on the cutting edge. Yet, this exploration begs the question: to what extent do these publicly owned utilities actually provide energy democracy? What struggles or constraints are they facing in doing so? And how does that contrast with investor-owned utilities?

Over the course of the next few months The Democracy Collaborative will be investigating these questions to identify how we enable robust system change that steers away from corporatized power towards energy democracy. This is part of a continuing series that will dive deeper into the grid to uncover best practices and political hurdles for public power.

Joanna Bozuwa writes for the Next System Project.

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THE OPIOID CRISIS

V I J A Y P R A S H A D

Sitting in a small cafe in a small town in western Massachusetts, Jordan talks about his problems with opioids. He was a construction worker, but an accident at his work site sent him to a hospital and into the arms of prescription painkillers. Jordan's doctor did not properly instruct him about the dangers of these pills, which he used to kill the pain that ran down his leg. When the prescription ran out, Jordan found he craved the pills. "I used up my savings buying them on the black market," he told me. When his own money ran out, Jordan got involved in petty theft. He went to prison for a short stint. The lack of proper care for his addiction in the prison allowed him to spiral into more dangerous drugs, which led to his near-death. Now released, Jordan struggles to make his way in the world.

With us is Mary, another recovering addict who entered the world of prescription drugs after she had a car accident a few years ago. Her shoulders and neck hurt badly and so Mary's doctor gave her a prescription for fentanyl, which is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine. Mary used a fentanyl patch, which allowed the drug to slowly seep into her body through her skin. It was inevitable, Mary told me, that she became addicted to the drug. The pain went away, but the longing for the opioid continued. Mary, like Jordan, is in a de-addiction program. It is an uphill climb, but Mary is confident. She is a bright person, whose eyes tell a story of great hope behind the fog of her addiction.

In late October, in Easthampton, Massachusetts, a small crowd gathered in public to talk about the scourge of the opioid epidemic in the area. Kaisa Clark talked about her sister Kristina, who died last year at the age of 32 from endocarditis. Kristina (Tina) was addicted, but was not given much support from the medical community. "Time and again my sister was made to feel like her life didn't matter," Kaisa said, her voice cracking. In her obituary,

Tina's family wrote movingly about her fight with addiction. "It was an uphill battle to acquire the necessary physical and mental health services that she required, as the stigma of substance abuse continues to plague all areas of our community."

These are some of the two million Americans who suffer from substance abuse disorders related to prescription opioid pain relievers. The numbers are staggering. In 2016, as many as 64,000 people died in the U.S. as a result of drug overdose. In 2015, the number was 52,404 dead, which means that the number increased by 22 percent over the year. But more staggering is that over the past three years, deaths by synthetic opioids (fentanyl) increased by 540 percent from 3,000 to 20,000. Illegal drugs—such as cocaine and heroin—continue to pose a challenge, but the real threat is from prescription opioids such as fentanyl of one kind or another. Each day, 175 Americans die from opioid overdose.

National Emergency

In early November, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency against opioid abuse. "The opioid is a tremendous emergency," he said in his characteristic style. The declaration of an emergency means that state funds should go post-haste to help stem the crisis. It is not clear, however, if this will be enough. There are indeed severe problems of inadequate funding for the treatment of addiction, and funds will be welcome. But the problem also exists at the other end—the production of the addicts. This would require a full-scale assault on the pharmaceutical industry. Whether Trump will have the stomach to take on this

**Between
2006 and 2015,
Purdue Pharma
and others who
produce opioids
spent
\$900 million
on their lobbying
efforts.**

— Vijay Prashad

powerful industry is to be seen.

In July, Dan Picard, a City Council member in the town of Middletown (Ohio), reported that the opioid epidemic had put immense pressure on the financial resources of the town. He suggested that the town adopt a "three strikes" approach to the crisis. If a person called for an ambulance because of an opioid overdose, the city would send medical care twice, administer the antidote (Narcan) and allow the person to survive. The third time, the person having an overdose would be left to die. "We need to put a fear about overdosing in Middletown," said Picard. He was chastised for his callousness.

But Picard is not alone. Across the “rust belt,” where de-industrialization has slowly eviscerated community after community, the opioid epidemic makes its way. Matters are so grave that in West Virginia, by early March, the state ran out of money to help bury the poor. West Virginia’s Funeral Directors Association president Frederick Kitchen said that this was largely the result of drug overdose deaths. Robert Kimes of the same association said that many funeral home directors had said that the majority of those who required the indigent burial program were young and “not financially in a great position.”

Princeton University economists Anne Case and Sir Angus Deaton looked carefully at the mortality rates for the U.S. working class and found them prone to “diseases of despair”—including drug overdose. In 2015, the Case-Deaton study found that there was a “sea of despair” that was drowning a generation of working-class Americans, with diseases such as drug addiction and alcoholism as evidence for the despair. In an updated version of the study that came out this year, Case and Deaton find that the collapse of the job market and the lack of hope among the working class have turned the poor towards various forms of addiction, including that of prescription drugs. Half the men who are out of the labor force, they suggest, are taking a prescription painkiller (such as an opioid).

“Although we do not see the supply of opioids as the fundamental factor,” Case and Deaton argue, “the prescription of opioids for chronic pain added fuel to the flames, making the epidemic much worse than it otherwise would have been.” Importantly, Case and Deaton point to the money. “We should note,” they suggest, “that a central beneficiary of opioids are the pharmaceutical companies that have promoted their sales.”

Social Reasons for Drug Overdose

Case and Deaton are right to point to the social reasons for the drug overdose epidemic—the despair in society as it suffers from unemployment and social collapse—but also correct to point a finger at the pharmaceutical industry. Purdue Pharma, which makes the popular drug OxyContin, made \$35 billion on this drug. The family that owns Purdue Pharma, the Sacklers, has made upwards of \$13 billion. They donate vast amounts of money to charity, particularly in the arts. But they have also lobbied Congress with laser-sharp intensity. Between 2006 and 2015, Purdue Pharma and others who produce opioids spent \$900 million on their lobbying efforts. That is eight times the amount spent by the gun lobby. They have purchased immunity from the elite, who are loath to stand up to stem the epidemic that is hemorrhaging poor communities across the U.S.

Matters get more horrid when one looks at the entire pharmaceutical industry. It is true that the drug industry has made a fortune selling painkillers—especially opioids—to the general public. But they also make a killing from selling the antidotes for an overdose. And they have shown their colors by raising prices as the epidemic spirals out of control. The drug that Picard

wanted to deny the overdose victim on their third call to the hospital is Narcan. One version of Narcan is called Evzio and is made by the pharmaceutical company Kaleo. In 2014, Kaleo sold two Evzio doses for \$690, but increased the price earlier this year to \$4,500. Kaleo controls about 20 percent of the antidote market. This means that it has been able to set the price for this drug across the market, including for generic naloxone, which doubled over the past year.

Neither Jordan nor Mary is able to easily face a world that seems to have turned its back on them. There are millions of others like them who live in “factory deserts,” in towns that have been utterly hollowed out by the new order of things. They have no faith in Trump’s emergency order. Some money will go towards opioid addiction, which they welcome. But that is not the crux of the matter. They point their fingers at the pharmaceutical industry and the billionaires in their society. There is money in their society, they tell me at different times, but it does not seem to be coming to them. “The rich would like us all to die or go to prison,” says Mary.

Vijay Prashad is the Director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. He is the author of, most recently, *The Death of a Nation* (University of California Press, 2016). He writes regularly in *AlterNet*.

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ATTACK ON ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

DAVE LINDORFF

These are tough days to be a serious journalist. Report a story now, with your facts all lined up nicely, and you're still likely to have it labeled "fake news" by anyone whose ox you've gored — and even by friends who don't share your political perspective. For good measure, they'll say you've based it on "alternative facts."

Historians say the term "fake news" dates from the late 19th-century era of "yellow journalism," but the term really took off in 2016, a little over a year ago, during Donald Trump's run for the presidency. It described several different things, from fact-free, pro-Trump online media to sensationalistic and largely untrue stories whose only goal was eyeballs and dollars. During the primary season, Trump himself began labeling all mainstream media stories about him as "fake news." The idea that there could be different truths, while dating at least back to the administration of President George W. Bush, when his consigliere Karl Rove claimed that the administration "made its own" reality, gained currency when Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway, caught making stuff up in a TV interview, claimed that she was relying on "alternative facts."

That dodge would be fine, on its own. Most people are primed to believe that politicians lie — whatever party or persuasion they represent — so their attempts to deny it when called a conjurer of falsehoods posing, tend to be recognized as such.

The corporate media — the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the network news programs and even National Public Radio — have all responded to being called liars and "fake news" fabricators by promoting themselves as "the reality-based community" (NPR), or claiming they are fighting the good fight against ignorance, as demonstrated by the *Post's* new masthead slogan "Democracy dies in darkness." The Times has stuck with its hoary "All

the news that's fit to print" slogan, but has added a page-three daily feature listing "noteworthy facts from today's paper" and has taken to calling out Trump administration whoppers as "lies."

Last December Congress passed a new law, promptly signed by then-President Barack Obama, that enacted an Orwellian amendment to the Defense Authorization Act of 2017. Called the Countering Disinformation and Propaganda Act, this measure tasks the State Department, in consultation with the Department of Defense, the director of national intelligence and an obscure government propaganda organization called the Broadcasting Board of Governors, to establish a "Center for Information Analysis and Response." The job of this new center, funded by a \$160 million, two-year budget allocation, would be to collect information on "foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts" and "proactively

advance fact-based narratives that support United States allies and interests."

What Is "Fake News"?

This might all seem laughable, but as a journalist who has worked in this field for 45 years, in both mainstream newspapers and television and in the alternative media, and as a long-time freelancer who has written for publications as widely varied as *Business Week*, the *Nation*, the *Village Voice* and a collectively run news site called *ThisCan'tBeHappening.net*, I have watched as this obsession with "fake news" has turned into an attack on alternative news and alternative news organizations.

Last Nov. 24, the *Washington Post* published a McCarthyite-style front-page article declaring that some 200

news sites on the web were actually witting or unwitting "purveyors of pro-Russian propaganda." The article, by *Post* National Security Reporter Craig Timberg, was based on the work of a shady outfit called PropOrNot, whose owner-organizers were kept anonymous by Timberg and whose source of funding was left unexplained. PropOrNot, Timberg wrote, had developed a list of sites which it had determined to be peddling "pro-Russia propaganda."

For one of the sites on the list, the prominent left-wing journal *Counterpunch*, founded decades ago by former *Village Voice* and *Nation* columnist Alexander

**I have
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attack on alternative
news and
alternative news
organizations.**

— Dave Lindorff



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Cockburn, PropOrNot offered up two articles as justification for its designation. One of those articles was by me. It was a piece I'd actually written for ThisCantBeHappening, which had been republished with credit by *Counterpunch*. The reviewer, a retired military intelligence officer named Joel Harding (who I discovered is linked to Fort Belvoir outside Washington, home to the U.S. Army's Information Operations Command, or INSCOM), labeled my article "absurdly pro-Russian propaganda."

In fact, the article was a pretty straightforward report on the Sept. 29, 2016 findings by the joint Dutch-Australian investigation into the July 2014 shoot-down of a Malaysian jumbo passenger jet over Ukraine, which concluded that Russia was the culprit. I noted in the article that this investigation was not legitimate, because two nations — Russia and Ukraine — were known to possess the Buk missiles and launchers that had brought down the plane, but only one of them, Ukraine, was permitted to offer evidence. Russian offers of evidence in the case were repeatedly rebuffed. The report also failed to mention that the Ukrainian government had received veto power over any conclusions reached by the investigators.

Report "Fake News" Or Propaganda?

The fake news in this case has been what has been written and aired by virtually all of the U.S. media, including the *Times*, the *Post* and all the major networks, about that horrific tragedy. They all continue to state as fact that a Russian Buk missile downed that plane, though no honest investigation has been conducted. (Technically it is true that the Buk missiles are all "Russian," in that they were all manufactured in Russia. Left unsaid is that Ukraine's military had Buk launchers since their nation was part of the Soviet Union and continued to purchase them after independence.)

Laziest Form of Media Criticism

"Labeling news reports that you don't like as 'fake news' is the laziest form of media criticism," says Jim Naureckas, editor of Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), a New York-based journalism review. "It's like putting your fingers in your ears and going 'la la la' really loudly. Both the government and the corporate media have

reasons for not wanting the public to hear points of view that are threats to their power."

While Kellyanne Conway claimed her right to offer "alternative facts" as a way to justify getting caught in a lie, there are also alternative facts which are real but don't get reported in the corporate media. A classic example was in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when the entire corporate media reported as fact that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and was attempting to develop a nuclear bomb.

There were plenty of alternative news organizations who quoted UN inspectors saying that none of that was true and there were no WMDs or WMD programs in Iraq, but they were simply blacked out by the corporate media like the *Times*, the *Post* and the major news networks.

These days another dubious story is that the Russians "hacked" the server of the Democratic National Committee. It may have happened that way, but in fact, the vast intelligence system the U.S. has constructed to monitor all domestic and foreign telecommunications has offered up no hard evidence of such a hack. National Security Agency whistleblower William Binney and retired CIA analyst Ray McGovern have suggested that some evidence indicates a DNC insider must have been involved.

There is certainly fake news all over the internet, and baseless conspiracies run rampant on both the left and the right. But all too often, articles like mine cited by PropOrNot (a genuine purveyor of fake news!) are being labeled as propaganda in what Naureckas says is simply "the use of irony as a defense mechanism" by news organizations that themselves are actually guilty of publishing really fake news, as the *Post* did with its PropOrNot blacklist "scoop."

"What the government and the corporate media are trying to do, with the help of the big internet corporations," argues Mickey Huff, director of the Project Censored organization in California, "is basically to shut down alternative news sites that question the media consensus position on issues."

A wide threat to online media. That's a threat to any online news organization that depends upon equal



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access to the internet and to fast download speeds. Already, Huff charges, there are reports that Facebook is slowing down certain sites that have links on its platform, in a misguided response to charges that it sold ad space to Russian government-linked organizations accused of trying to influence last November's presidential election.

An end to internet neutrality, the equal access to high-speed internet for surfing and downloading that has been guaranteed to all users -- but that is now under attack by the Trump administration, its Federal Communications Commission and a Republican-led Congress -- would make it that much easier for such a shutdown of alternative media to happen.

The real answer, of course, is for readers and viewers of all media, mainstream or alternative, to become critical consumers of news. This means not just looking at articles critically, including this one, but going to multiple sources for information on important issues. Relying on just the *Times* or the *Post*, or on Fox News or NPR, will leave you informationally malnourished -- not just uninformed but misinformed. Even if you were to read both those papers and watch both those networks, you'd often be left with an incomplete version of the truth.

To get to the truth, we need to also check out alternative news sources, whether of the left, right or center -- and we need to maintain the critical distinction between unpopular or unorthodox points of view and blatant lies or propaganda. Without such a distinction, and the freedom to make such decisions for ourselves, maintaining democracy will be impossible.

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F C C
**FAKE NEWS IS
ONLY THE
BEGINNING**

SUE WILSON

What would happen if the politician you love to hate were indicted, but your local news didn't report it? No newspaper stories, no TV news, no radio news on the hour, nothing. Couldn't happen? Think again.

The Republican-controlled Federal Communications Commission will vote next week to allow just one corporation to own the local newspaper plus nearly every commercial TV station in your town. Nifty way to reduce down to just one newsroom then dictate whatever information that corporation does—and does not—want you to know in this democracy.

It's exactly what's happened with radio. Back in the day when lots of companies owned 40 radio stations, the broadcast industry made big promises that local information would be much more diverse if they could simply own many more stations. The 1996 Telecommunications Act resulted in a handful of corporations owning thousands of stations—and force feeding conservative programming down our country's throats ever since, no debate, no opposing opinions allowed.

The Media Action Center showed during the Scott Walker recall in Wisconsin that “conservative” radio giants there gave millions of dollars in free airtime to the GOP candidate—while refusing to allow a single Democrat on the air at all. GOP operatives there still gloat about radio winning elections

for them. After 21 years of this kind of divisive public policy, 60 million people listen to conservative radio, about the same number that voted for Donald Trump.

Now the FCC is quietly trying to do the same thing to our local TV stations. In 2003, when they just tried to allow TV stations to own newspapers, 3 million people rose up and said “No!” Now they want to allow the newspapers plus all the TV stations in one town to have the same owner, and they're not even asking for public comment.

So why does the broadcast industry want the FCC to consolidate to such an alarming degree?

– Sue Wilson

Meanwhile, FCC Commissioners are in a PR frenzy to have us believe TV is dying. Chair Ajit V. Pai tweeted, “Among Americans aged 18-29, online streaming is the primary means of watching TV.”

Commissioner Michael O'Rielly, citing Pew Research, writes: “By 2016, only 46 percent of respondents viewed broadcast TV as a source of news and 38 percent ‘got news yesterday’ from an online

source,” then talks about people getting news from Google and Facebook.

But what matters is not whether we stream on a device or watch on a big screen. What matters is the integrity and diversity of our information.

Google and Facebook don't produce news or hire reporters to ferret out what's going on at City Hall or the state Capitol or White House. That's the terrain of newspapers and TV broadcasters.

Independent online news organizations are growing, but their influence is negligible: According to August 2017 Pew studies, about 52 million people watch local TV news, compared to about 23 million who access digitally produced news, but those 23 million people may visit the online news sites just once a month—for an average of just 2.4 minutes. The FCC's argument doesn't hold up.

So why does the broadcast industry want the FCC to consolidate to such an alarming degree? It's not money. *Fortune Magazine* cites record industry profits, with BIA/Kelsey reporting that local television station revenue reached \$28.4 billion in 2016. They're rolling in the dough, so why the sudden push to

change things?

We know why. We know why Sinclair Broadcasting, renowned for its alt-right editorializing over our public airwaves, wants to reach 72 percent of U.S. homes with its propaganda. We know this is the White House's agenda. We know what happens when we allow just a few companies to control everything we read, see and hear. We know.

Media reform group Free

Press President Craig Aaron says if the FCC doesn't abandon this plan, "they'll find themselves back in court for failing to study the issue, take public input, and address the fact that so few stations are owned by women and people of color. We've won this fight before, and we can prevail again."

They won this fight before because 3 million Americans stood up for free speech.

Stand up. You can email the

FCC, call your representatives in Congress and support Free Press' legal case. This is a watershed moment. Ten years from now, people could look at their local news reporting and wonder how it ever went so wrong. You've heard of fake news? You ain't seen nothing yet.

Sue Wilson is the Emmy-winning director of the documentary "Broadcast Blues," editor of suewilsonreports.com and founder of the Media Action Center.

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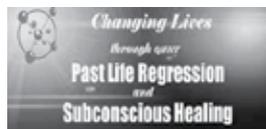
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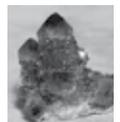
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FOOD AND HEALTH CARE

DARIUSH MOZAFFARIAN

The national debate on health care is moving into a new, hopefully bipartisan phase. The fundamental underlying challenge is cost—the massive and ever-rising price of care which drives nearly all disputes, from access to benefit levels to Medicaid expansion. So far, policymakers have tried to reduce costs by tinkering with how care is delivered. But focusing on care delivery to save money is like trying to reduce the costs of house fires by focusing on firefighters and fire stations.

A more natural question should be: What drives poor health in the U.S., and what can be done about it?

We know the answer. Food is the number one cause of poor health in America. As a cardiologist and public health scientist, I have studied nutrition science and policy for 20 years. Poor diet is not just about individual choice, but about the systems that make eating poorly the default for most Americans. If we want to cut down on disease and achieve meaningful health care reform, we should make it a top nonpartisan priority to address our nation's nutrition crisis.

Food and Health

Our dietary habits are the leading driver of death and disability, causing an estimated 700,000 deaths each year. Heart disease, stroke, obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cancers, immune function, brain health – all are influenced by what we eat.

For example, our recent research estimated that poor diet causes nearly half of all U.S. deaths due to heart disease, stroke and diabetes. There are almost 1,000 deaths from these causes alone, every day.

By combining national data on demographics, eating habits and disease rates with empirical evidence on how specific foods are linked to health, we found that most of the problems are

caused by too few healthy foods like fruits and vegetables and too much salt, processed meats, red meats, and sugary drinks.

To put this in perspective, about twice as many Americans are estimated to die each year from eating hot dogs and other processed meats (roughly 58,000 deaths/year) than from car accidents (roughly 35,000 deaths/year).

Poor eating also contributes to U.S. disparities. People with lower incomes and who are otherwise disadvantaged often have the worst diets. This causes a vicious cycle of poor health, lost productivity, increased health costs and poverty.

Our dietary habits are the leading driver of death and disability, causing an estimated 700,000 deaths each year.

– Dariush Mozaffarian

What a Poor Diet Costs

It's hard to fathom how much our country actually spends on health care: currently \$3.2 trillion per year, or nearly 1 in 5 dollars in the entire economy. That's almost \$1,000 each month for every man, woman and child in the country, exceeding most people's budgets for food, gas, housing or other common necessities.

Diet-related conditions account for vast health expenditures. Each year, cardiovascular diseases alone result in about \$200 billion in direct health care spending and another \$125 billion

in lost productivity and other indirect costs.

At the same time, health care costs cripple the productivity and profits of American businesses. From small to large companies, crushing health care expenditures are a major obstacle to growth and success. Warren Buffet recently called rising medical costs the “tapeworm of American economic competitiveness.” Our food system is feeding the tapeworm.

Yet, remarkably, nutrition is virtually ignored by our health care system and in the health care debates – both now and a decade ago when Obamacare was passed. Traveling around the country, I find that dietary habits are not included in the electronic medical record, and doctors receive scant training on healthy eating and other lifestyle priorities. Reimbursement standards and quality metrics rarely cover nutrition.

Meanwhile, total federal spending for nutrition research across all agencies is only about \$1.5 billion per year. Compare that with more than \$60 billion spent per year for industry research on drugs, biotechnology and medical devices.

With the top cause of poor health largely ignored, is it any mystery that obesity, diabetes and related conditions are at epidemic levels, while health care costs and premiums skyrocket?

Moving Forward

Advances in nutrition science highlight the most important dietary targets, including foods that should be encouraged or avoided. Policy science provides a road map for successfully addressing our country's nutrition crisis.

For example, according to our calculations, a national program to subsidize the cost of fruits and vegetables by 10 percent could save 150,000 lives over 15 years, while a national 10 percent soda tax could save 30,000 lives.

Similarly, a government-led initiative to reduce salt in packaged

foods by about three grams per day could prevent tens of thousands of cardiovascular deaths each year, while saving between \$10 to \$24 billion in health care costs annually.

Companies across the country have been rethinking their approach to employee health, providing a range of financial and other benefits for healthier lifestyles. Life insurance has also realized the return on the investment, rewarding clients for healthier living with fitness tracking devices, lower premiums and healthy food benefits which pay back up to \$600 each year for nutritious grocery purchases. Every dollar spent on wellness programs generates about \$3.27 in lower medical

costs and \$2.73 in less absenteeism.

Similar technology-based incentive platforms could be offered to Americans on Medicare, Medicaid and SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps)—together reaching one in three adults nationally. In 2012, Ohio Senator Rob Portman proposed a Medicare “Better Health Rewards” program to reward seniors for not smoking and for achieving lower weight, blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol. This program should be reintroduced, with updated technology platforms and financial incentives for healthier eating and physical activity.

Several other key strategies should be added, together forming a

core for modern healthcare reform. Incorporating such sensible initiatives for better eating will actually improve well-being while lowering costs, allowing expanded coverage for all.

By any measure, fixing our nation’s nutrition crisis should be a nonpartisan priority. Policy leaders should learn from past successes such as tobacco reduction and car safety. Through modest steps, we can achieve real reform that makes healthier eating the new normal, improves health and actually reduces costs.

Dariusz Mozaffarian teaches Nutrition at Tufts University.

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RENEWABLE
ENERGY

TRACY STAEDTER

Scientists have published a detailed road map to move 139 countries to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050, according to a recent study.

Energy experts at Stanford University reported that using wind, solar, geothermal and water (hydro-power, tidal and wave) energy to electrify all economic sectors that need power to operate — including the electric grid itself, transportation, heating and cooling, industrial, and the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries — would significantly reduce energy consumption, decrease deaths from air pollution, create millions of jobs, stabilize energy prices and save trillions of dollars on health care and climate-related costs.

“We have individual plans for each of the 139 countries, and these represent more than 99 percent of all of the emissions worldwide,” Mark Jacobson, director of Stanford University’s Atmosphere and Energy program, told *Live Science*.

The study looked at the world’s energy needs, beginning with 2012 and projecting out to 2050. In 2012, the world used 12.105 terawatts (TW) of energy, which is equal to 12.105 trillion watts. By 2050, the world will need 20.604 TW if nothing changes and every country continues with the same approach it currently uses to meet energy demand, the researchers wrote in the study.

But if those same business sectors were to turn to renewable energy sources to electrify all of their power requirements, the world

would need just 11.804 TW to meet global power demands, according to the study. This is because electricity is more efficient than combustion, according to the researchers.

In a video explaining the main points of the study, Jacobson offered an example: In an electric car, he said, 80 to 82 percent of the electricity used goes toward moving the car; the rest is wasted as heat. In a gasoline-powered vehicle, on the other hand, only 17 to 20 percent of the energy in the fuel goes toward

report authors said.

Road Map for the Future

In their study, Jacobson and his colleagues show how wind, water, geothermal and solar power can meet the worldwide demand for 11.804 TW of energy while avoiding the predicted global temperature increase of 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit (1.5 degrees Celsius) above preindustrial levels by 2050. The researchers outline how doing so would save the lives of 4 million to 7 million people who might have otherwise died from diseases caused by air pollution, save countries more than \$20 trillion overall in health and climate costs, and produce a net increase of more than 24 million long-term jobs.

“It seems like a no-brainer to me,” Jacobson told *Live Science*.

The study builds on previous work from Jacobson, who began his career as a research scientist trying to understand how air pollution affects the climate. He said that in the early years, he focused on the problems, but by around 1999, he started looking at solutions.

In 2009, Jacobson and Mark Delucchi, a research scientist at the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, published a study in *Scientific American* that outlined a plan to power the world with 100 percent renewable energy.

In the ensuing years, Jacobson and Delucchi worked on follow-up studies that examined these issues at the state level, and the researchers have now expanded that research to 139 countries. Detailed energy data for the remaining 59 countries in the world did not exist and thus could not be included in the

Switching to 100 percent renewable energy would eliminate these energy intensive and environmentally destructive processes.

— Tracy Staedter

moving the car, and the rest is wasted as heat, he said.

Energy is also needed to mine, refine and transport fossil fuels. As such, switching to 100 percent renewable energy would eliminate these energy-intensive and environmentally destructive processes, the

study, the scientists said.

The overall cost of transitioning to an infrastructure of 100 percent renewable energy — a plan that sees countries moving first to 80 percent renewable energy by 2030 — may, at first glance, seem cost-prohibitive, but Jacobson and his team have crunched those numbers, too.

Jacobson said that, when averaged over all countries, the cost of building renewable energy systems, including storage and transmission, is 8.9 cents per kilowatt-hour (kWh). In a world that doesn't transition and keeps the current fossil-fuel system, the cost is 9.8 cents/kWh. And that doesn't include the cost to society.

Climate Change's Price

Fossil-fuel energy comes with health-and climate-related costs. The authors estimate that by 2050, countries will spend upwards of \$28 trillion per year in costs for environmental, property, and human health issues related to global warming, including floods, real-estate destruction, agricultural loss, drought, wildfires, heat stress and stroke, air pollution, influenza, malaria, dengue fever, famine, ocean

acidification and more.

And if the world takes no action to address climate change and ice continues to melt at Earth's poles at the current pace, 7 percent of the world's coastlines will be underwater, Jacobson said.

Jacobson said the total societal cost of renewable energy--which includes the cost of health and climate issues, as well as the direct cost of energy for wind, water and solar power--is about one-fourth that of fossil fuels.

"In other words, you reduce the total cost to society by about 75 percent," he said. "The cost benefits of this are huge."

Several countries are already moving toward a renewable energy portfolio to meet 100 percent of their power demands for all business sectors, according to the study. The list includes Tajikistan (76.0 percent), Paraguay (58.9 percent), Norway (35.8 percent), Sweden (20.7 percent), Costa Rica (19.1 percent), Switzerland (19.0 percent), Georgia (18.7 percent), Montenegro (18.4 percent) and Iceland (17.3 percent).

So far, the United States has

just 4.2 percent of its total electricity generated by renewable sources. But the country has an advantage, according to the researchers. The study found that countries like the U.S., with more land per population size, would have the easiest time making the transition. Countries expected to have the most difficult time are those that are small, geographically, but have very large populations. Countries such as Singapore, Gibraltar and Hong Kong will have the biggest challenges transitioning to 100 percent renewable energy, according to Jacobson.

Still, there are ways to solve the problem, he said. These regions could turn to offshore wind energy, or they could exchange energy with a neighboring country, he added.

"With this information, we're giving confidence to countries that they can be self-sufficient," Jacobson said. "I'm hoping that different countries will commit to 100 percent renewable energy [by 2050] and 80 percent by 2030."

Tracy Staedter writes for *Live Science* and other publications.

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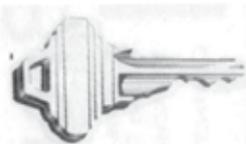
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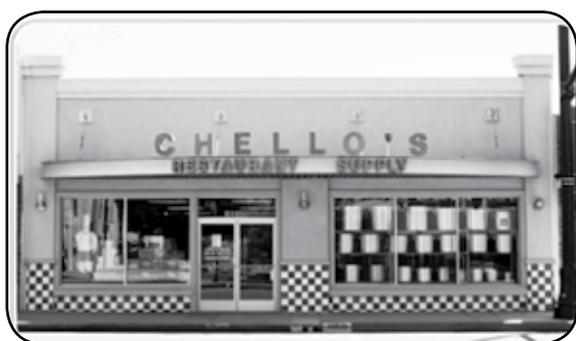
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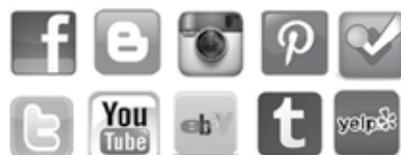
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HONDURAS' KITCHEN

LET US COOK FOR THE HOLIDAYS



CHRISTMAS MENU

TAMALES DE CHANCHO (PORK)	\$27^{DZ}
TAMALES DE POLLO (CHICKEN)	\$27^{DZ}
GALLINA INDIA (WHOLE RAISE CHICKEN)	\$55.00
PIERNA DE CHANCHO (PORK LEG)	\$100.00
QUEQUE HONDUREÑO (HONDURAN CAKE)	\$45.00
ARROZ CON POLLO (CHICKEN) SERVES 15 PEOPLE	\$100.00

1. ALL ORDERS MUST HAVE A 50 PERCENT DEPOSIT IN ADVANCE.
2. THE LAST DATE TO ORDER IS DECEMBER 22TH.
3. ALL ORDERS MUST BE PICKED UP BETWEEN 12PM AND 6PM ON DECEMBER 24TH
4. ALL ABANDONED ORDERS WILL LOSE THEIR DEPOSIT.

562.624.8849
1909 E. 4 ST.
LONG BEACH

323.582.9139
2409 E. SLAUSON AVE.
HUNTINGTON PARK