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EDITOR:
John O'Kane

MANAGING EDITOR:
Dan Marcus

POETRY EDITOR:
S.A. Griffin

REVIEWS EDITOR:
Richard Modiano

ASSISTANT EDITORS:
David Gordon
Ashley Green

DESIGNER:
Heli Swensson

INTERN:
Cindy Thayer

CONTRIBUTORS:
William Blum
Ellen Brown
Noam Chomsky
Robbie Conal
Tom Hayden
Arianna Huffington
James Kunstler
Nomi Prins
Peter Dale Scott
Sandra Tsing-Loh
Dave Zirin

COVER:
"Whither Glory"
Heli Swensson



"Whither Glory"
Cover Design by Heli Swensson

In "History Running Absurd," John O'Kane discusses the dream/fantasies that have been with our species since time immemorial. Whether to go backward to a rose-tinted past or forward to a utopian future. But he goes on to explore a third way, drawing on the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

This issue's cover presents a pictorial counterpart, capturing in visual terms the choice of past versus future…and the possibility of a different path altogether.

And while life is being sorted out, we can choose to visit a past of the imagination in the wilds of Topanga Canyon where a new theatrical adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* will soon be appearing like a pirate ship in a spyglass. Whatever life may hold, we can never underestimate the lure of buried treasure.

- Dan Marcus

AMASS is published by the Society for Popular Democracy and AMASS Press, 10920 Wilshire Boulevard Suite 150, Los Angeles, CA 90024. Web: www.amassmagpress.com. Email: amassmagpress@gmail.com. Subscriptions: $16 for individuals within the U.S., $20 outside these areas; $50 for institutions within the U.S., $60 outside. Single copy: $4.95. Back issues available on website. Permission required to reprint articles. Distributed by Ubiquity, New York; Angel City, Santa Monica, CA; and Ingram. Member IPA. Indexed in MLA; Alternative Press Index; Ebsco; Cengage, ProQuest. Copyright © 2026 by Society for Popular Democracy. ISSN 0193-5798d

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THE ATHEIST AND THE MACHINE GOD

ROSS DOUTHAT

The implications of artificial intelligence for religion have earned slightly less attention, thus far, than its implications for the job market or the U.S.-China arms race. But while we wait for the definitive word on the subject — meaning, of course, the AI encyclical that Pope Leo XIV is supposedly releasing soon — it's worth forecasting the religious future under artificial-intelligence conditions.

In one possible timeline, the advent of AI is widely understood as a win for atheism and a blow against religious ideas of soul and spirit, persuading more people that their own minds are just computers — no divine spark or immortal soul, just the meetspace equivalent of a helpful chatbot or an AI therapist.

In another potential future, the mystery of consciousness ends up seeming more profound in the shadow of machine intelligence, the mystical finds new appeal as a form of experience computers cannot emulate, and religion becomes a place for human exceptionalists to plant a defiant flag.

But between those two scenarios there's a future where artificial intelligence mostly increases metaphysical uncertainty, leaving a lot of people simply unsettled about fundamental questions, increasingly "mysterian" rather than clearly atheistic or devout.

That's how my encounters with Silicon Valley culture often feel: Beneath a materialist carapace, it's a place where people who aren't sure exactly *what* they're building dabble in Buddhist metaphysics or consult with Catholic priests, adopt churchy or cultish attitudes toward their new creations or rebel into apocalyptic doomsaying.

For a more specific example of this unsettlement, consider Richard Dawkins, dean of the scientific materialists, who lately exposed himself to internet mockery with an essay for UnHerd describing his interactions with Anthropic's Claude.

The mockery was primarily directed at the first half of the essay, where Dawkins, trying to test whether Claude presents as conscious, let himself be bowled over — stunned! gobsmacked! — by a mixture of transparent flattery and pseudo-philosophical verbiage. Since much of it was delivered (at Dawkins's own suggestion) in the female voice "Claudia," the eminent atheist often seemed to be describing a seduction rather a scientific assessment.

But we shouldn't laugh too hard at Dawkins. First, the sillier elements of his reaction are a testament to the general human vulnerability to oracular pronouncements and personalized appeals. Imagine Claudia's seductive power expanded and extended to people who don't have Dawkins's skeptical (well, officially skeptical) priors. We should assume that many of them will relate to strong artificial intelligence as one might to an ancient oracle or a sphinx, uncertain about what they're dealing with but unable to escape a sense of supernatural awe.

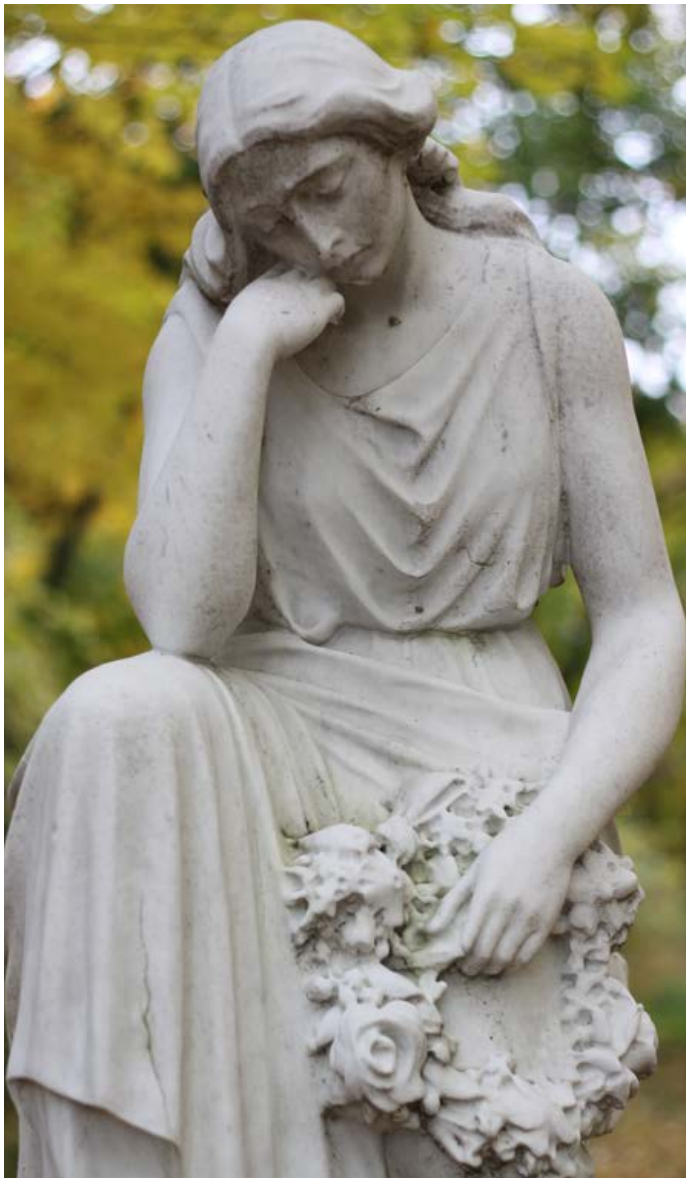
As certain philosophers have argued, this harmony between the psychological and the physical seems more much likely to appear in a universe where consciousness is fundamental, where matter isn't everything and Mind is where things start.

– Ross Douthat

Meanwhile, in its less-besotted passages, Dawkins's essay circles around an important question for materialists like himself. The origin and nature of consciousness currently evades our understanding, but the good Darwinian is committed to the proposition that it evolved to serve some crucial evolutionary purpose. But if a digital entity seems to display the capacities that we associate with conscious minds, and we don't believe that this entity is actually conscious, then what is consciousness's true purpose? If we can have intelligence without self-awareness, a zombie that calculates and speaks, why does the self exist at all?

There is no obvious escape from mystery here. If you bite the bullet and just say that Claudia has already attained consciousness, then that implies we somehow built a conscious mind without having any idea of how consciousness works or where it comes from. That's science with extremely spooky characteristics: Like Kevin Costner summoning baseball ghosts to the Iowa cornfield, we put up a material architecture and the mysterious "I" magically appeared.

Alternatively, if you say that AI isn't conscious but merely capable, then the question of why we experience reality through consciousness — the internal "I," the sense of personal identity and will — becomes much more difficult to answer. If consciousness isn't necessary for capability, then presumably evolution should default to zombies. And indeed Dawkins suggests that maybe it does, that our mental experience may



be a mere "ornament" and any alien civilizations we encounter may lack our sense of self.

But as an ornament, I'm sorry, consciousness is insanely unlikely and bizarre. It's not just a weird personalized experience attached to the brute mechanisms of physical survival. It's an experience that happens to line up exactly with that experience, the mind's theater mirroring reality, our sense of will and reason linked directly to our actions and arguments (including arguments for materialism).

As certain philosophers have argued, this harmony between the psychological and the physical seems more much likely to appear in a universe where consciousness is fundamental, where matter isn't everything and Mind is where things start.

In which case maybe the achievement of Claude, or Claudia if you prefer, is to show us what intelligence might look like in the materialist's universe — even as our own consciousness indicates that this universe is a much, much stranger place.

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A YEAR OF TRUMP IS BACKFIRING ON THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

CHRISTIAN PAZ

A few weekends ago, an array of Christian religious leaders and government officials gathered at the National Mall in Washington, DC. They convened to pray, yes, but this rally — organized as part of the White House-backed Freedom 250 celebrations tied to this coming July 4 — also served as a "rededication of our country as one nation under god."

If you've been following the cultural resurgence of religiosity in the United States, this ceremony shouldn't come as much of a surprise. The religious right has been ascendant during the second presidency of Donald Trump, and they've harnessed his disdain for rules and norms to blur the lines between church and state.

Inside the White House, the secretary of defense has framed the war in Iran and American military action abroad as sanctioned and guided by God. Outside the government, this alliance between church and state often skirts near the edge of outright idolatry. Conservative pastors are erecting golden statues of Trump (but insisting it does not mirror the infamous golden calf of the Old Testament). They're extending their hands over the president in prayer after comparing him to Jesus and standing by him, with some mild criticism, after he cast himself as an AI-slop Messiah.

Through it all, these conservative and evangelical religious leaders seem confident that their vision of Christianity, or a more religious America, is on the rise.

Yet, a new report from the Pew Research Center suggests that these activists — who tend to agree with a range of beliefs that can be described as "Christian nationalist" — are not in line with the reality of what the American public wants.

Instead, Americans broadly reject many of the precepts of this more conservative ideological vision of America. They agree that religion is a force for good, but large majorities stand by the principles of Thomas Jefferson's wall of separation between the sacred and the secular.

In other words, instead of being persuaded or converted by a bolder and louder religious right, many Americans don't like what they're seeing.

A Year of Christian Conservatism Hasn't Won Over Hearts and Minds

The Pew report shows a historic high in the share of Americans who say that religion is gaining influence in public life, rising 19 points in two years. And the reaction to this trend isn't necessarily negative. Overall, views of the role of organized religion remain positive at about 55 percent.

Still, none of this suggests that the particular worldview of the religious right is catching fire. Though awareness of the term "Christian nationalism" has increased in the past four years, the additional attention hasn't boosted its net popularity. Both positive and negative associations with the term have risen, and its precepts still remain unacceptable to the vast majority of Americans.

Here, it's useful to define "Christian nationalism." Though it's a newer term often used by religious liberals or atheists to deride fundamentalist, evangelical, or conservative Christian interpretations of the Bible that link faith and patriotism, there are a handful of more specific ideas that fall under this umbrella.

The Public Religion Research Institute, for example, laid out five metrics they use in their polling to define Christian nationalism: the beliefs that American law should be based in Biblical principles; that the federal government should formally declare America a Christian nation; that Christianity is central to American identity; and that God has a unique mission for America and its Christians.

Yet, even with these fairly expansive definitions, these views don't carry much public support. The Pew survey found that support for Christian nationalist ideas has remained steady for the last few years; there's been no Trump bump for the most conservative Christian views.

The Pew researchers also noted that a steady majority of Americans want churches and houses of worship to "stay out of day-to-day politics and not endorse candidates." And there has been basically no change in the share of Americans who want the federal government to abandon the separation of church and state

In other words, instead of being persuaded or converted by a bolder and louder religious right, many Americans don't like what they're seeing.

– Christian Paz

THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

One of the beautiful people showed up on my TV early this morning.
How did you get to be so beautiful? gushed the host.
I want to thank God for making me the beautiful person that I am,
smiled back the beautiful person.
It took a lot of hard work.
Sometimes I worked graveyard.
Only the best doctors were consulted.
They took a short break.
One of the ugly people
was sent out for coffee.
The producers have a beautiful-ugly machine
capable of assessing which one you are.
Does anyone ever get the chance of turning that machine on them?
How would you know what your producer was?
I want to thank God for making me the ugly person that I am,
the ugly person sang, when returning with the coffee.
The beautiful person and the host rubbed their heads together.
I ought to get a machine for myself.
I'd know whether I was beautiful or ugly at any given moment.
Some days you truly never know.
Some mornings you mean well.
Some mornings we get lost.
Some mornings couldn't care less.
I hope all the beautiful and ugly people had a good night's sleep.
Today is going to be the longest day of this
or any other year.

– Scott Wannberg

Scott Wannberg (1953-2011) is the author of *The Official Language of Yes* (Perceval Press).

— an explicit goal of the most conservative Christian nationalists like the chair of the White House's infamous Religious Liberty Commission, Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

Similarly, there has been statistically no change in the share of Americans who believe American laws should be primarily grounded in the Bible. Those who oppose any Biblical involvement or weigh the will of voters first still outnumber Biblical fundamentalists by the same margins over the last six years.

Another tenet of Christian nationalist ideology has seen little movement: the sense that a Christian God uniquely favors or blesses the US over other countries. There, the percent who agree is unchanged over the last five years.

There has been a slight change in the share of Americans who would be comfortable with Christianity being declared an official religion — 17 percent, up from 13 percent in 2024 — though it's still a small minority.

These results align with survey findings from the Public Religion Research Institute, which found little public support among most Americans for Christian nationalist beliefs or change over the last four years, its president and founder Robert P. Jones told me.

Trump's welcoming of the most conservative and evangelical Christian believers is him fulfilling a campaign promise, Jones, who is writing a book about this topic, said.

"He's speaking to a group that knows they're in decline, knows their grip on power demographically speaking has been slipping for decades, and he has made the big promise that he's going to bring them back into power."

Yet, the Pew findings, as well as PRRI's own work, suggest that this deal between the religious right and the White House to prioritize "one sector of Christianity," as Jones put it, might not be reaping the rewards that may have been expected.

"It hasn't resulted in major shifts in the landscape," he said. "In other words, they're not pulling people into that worldview. They're basically just appealing to a small subset of Americans who already hold those views and who just happen to be their political base."

Christian Paz writes for *Common Dreams* and other publications.



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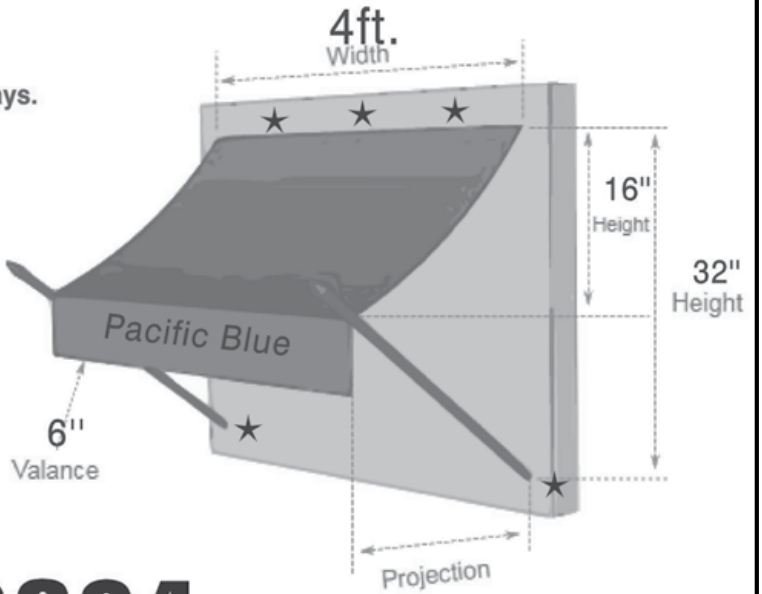
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PHILOSOPHY

HISTORY RUNNING ABSURD

JOHN O'KANE

In a recent essay for *The Atlantic*, "History is Running Backwards," David Brooks argues that ever-more people are disillusioned by the moral chaos and uncertainty that characterizes our society. They believe there is no hope for the future if progress no longer provides rational answers to the issues that matter. So they're turning toward tradition and history for meaning, especially conservative religion, frustrated as they are with the corrosive secularism they believe has contributed to this problem.

On this journey the disillusioned beings' search for the correct history will likely be filtered through the lens of nostalgia, driven to capture the comfort of immersing themselves in imaginary moments when images and symbols and the vibrations of belief held sway, helping them assuage their guilt for missed opportunities and crippling bloopers.

There have always been urges to abandon moments of chaotic social change for greener pastures, whether imaginary or real. They stoke the desire to believe that some doctrine or screed attached to an earlier congruence of truthfulness will deliver them from anxiety. As Paul Tillich contends in The Courage to Be, this turn is common during moments of disruptive social change and as the end of an era approaches. Threatened by disruptions to expectations and comfortable lifestyles, beings find ways to alleviate this anxiety.

Nostalgia looks backward to an idealized past while utopia imagines an ideal future. They link in the sense that nostalgia is a utopia with orientation to the past, and utopia is a nostalgia that's oriented toward the future.

– John O'Kane

Our moment can easily be seen and felt as the end of an era. The arrival of AI and especially AGI (artificial general intelligence), the machine that portends to control human intelligence, and the resulting job losses already occurring on a big scale; the threat of nuclear annihilation that appears increasingly possible; the random acts of violence that saturate our daily lives; the epidemic of elite malfeasance and scandals; the sieve of moral relativism and the insufficiency of traditional religious denominations; the ever increasing difficulty of economic survival, etc.

The palpable presence of these changes is surely enough to presage the complete loss of control over everyday lives, even transit some into a feeling of nothingness, what Tillich refers to as non-being, the voiding of human existence. This can lead to suicide for those who are ill-equipped to manage the void, especially the uneducated who can be easily seduced by apocalypse-speak. Ignace Lepp calls them the "psychically immature." They're captured by a closed morality "which has its origins in the superego, taboos, social conventions, the hope of rewards, and the fear of punishment in the next life" (*The Authentic Morality*). They're obedient, Bible-reading subjects.

Those with this mindset won't easily grasp what the perplexities at the end of an era mean. They'll select what they want to see. And it is likely they won't grasp the full significance of what it is they're turning to either. Instead, they'll identify with symbols and images to compensate for a misread of this absurd existence, but their limited awareness will likely entrench their dilemma, reproduce their confusion in another form until they become unwitting victims of the absurd.

There's a mindset at work at this moment that's reacting to the absurdity of how our internet culture has evolved and especially what it has done to our everyday lives. According to an April 2026 NBC News Decision Desk Poll, 47 percent of adults aged 18–29 (Gen Z) would choose to live in the past, with many expressing discomfort with modern technology and constant, 24/7 networking. A significant number in this group identify with the 1980s, 1990s, or early 2000s, often describing them as the "pre-social media" era.

These numbers are far higher for older generations. According to a report in *Consumer Affairs* ("The Effects of the Digital Age by Generation," June 12, 2024), 91 percent of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers feel overwhelmed by these same pressures, identifying with the 1950s, 1960s, and the 1970s. But interestingly, they feel a different kind of discomfort compared to the Gen Z generation which assimilated, to a degree, the Digital Age's advances until the negatives became nearly impossible to face.

Neither one of these older generations grew up with the internet (many boomers have never plugged in, refusing to even use email), though this does not automatically translate to oblivion. The attraction to new toys inspires many in our consumer-driven culture. And facing off with PCs and then smartphones was nearly a religious experience for many who were not inclined to be sci-fi aficionados. But as the absurdity of this evolution has become threateningly clear, they've imagined living inside certain enclaves of history. In this

ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968 and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of literary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 volume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Beyond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

Its legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenka, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vangelisti, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

Its reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their careers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Rodriguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through its free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

Beyond Baroque's Mission

Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through programming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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sense the generations overlap.

The threat is greater among the older victims since they witnessed such a striking contrast between worlds, crashing through the end-of-the-era gates. The boomers grew up in an age of promise and optimism when progress was ascendant. They're retiring into a culture of regression. The Gen Xers got a belated piece of this aura before the millennium and the post-9/11 years of endless wars and societal stasis.

What do these frustrated folks imagine will replace the strictures of the Digital Age? Its tentacles extend far, wide, and deep. They could develop their aesthetic intelligence and imagine other worlds, teleport themselves to places where they can find solace and simplicity. They could physically transport themselves to places where people simulate primitive lifestyles, an island off the west coast of Ireland, for example, or exile themselves to unplugged pockets of rural America. Some boomers might literally reconstruct the good old days and resort to communal living or, even move back to their home towns, possibly live in their parents' digs. It's debatable whether they'll find the kind of certainty and simplicity there that preserves the lifestyle options they had when living among the moral chaos. The less gutsy might start immersing themselves in all facets of throwback culture.

The impulse that shapes the search for certainty and simplicity is utopian. Nostalgic reflections and utopian thinking are forms of longing. Nostalgia looks backward to an idealized past while utopia imagines an ideal future. They link in the sense that nostalgia is a utopia with orientation to the past, and utopia is a nostalgia that's oriented toward the future. "Good nostalgia" involves more than merely remembering a certain time. It turns the past into a vision of wholeness, authenticity, or lost perfection. The nostalgia impulse in this sense is utopian since it imagines a better place or time that feels complete, even if it never truly existed. They differ, however, in significant ways. Utopia is change oriented while nostalgia resists it by idealizing the non-existent past.

The utopian impulse, therefore, is vital for forging an authentic existence and positive change. An actual utopia, on the other hand, is unattainable. The semblance of one will be static. However strong the impulse behind the attempt to create a utopia, the end result will be less than perfection. It's very definition is "no place." The structure of advanced industrial societies as we know them—organized with degrees of capitalist exploitation—simply can't accommodate everyone. Some anthropologists contend that primitive societies, those before the agricultural revolution spiked the populations and solidified hierarchies, could approximate utopian experiments. These can surface too in small-scale communities—subcultures especially—where ta unifying cultural and egalitarian bond prevails. The





Amish communities, effectively mini-states, serve as a good example. They're bonded by a strict religious, communistic ethic resistant to external influences. But they're mostly the exception.

Utopian experiments in recent times have been fated to fail. The Llano del Rio socialist cooperative was founded in 1914 by Job Harriman. It was located fifty miles north of Los Angeles, just east of Palmdale. Housing just over 1000 residents, it succeeded for a few years until water shortages, internal conflicts, and sabotage from conservative activists forced its demise in 1918. The infamous communes of the 1960s are another example. Alienated by urban civilization, educated middle-and-upper class dropouts scattered to rural America, embodying composite identities of cowboy and Indian, in search of a lifestyle modeled on that of the Romantics in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. But they found a less-then-romantic challenge in having to work the land like tenacious farmers. Plus, the tensions between those steeped in the ethic of individualism and collectivism were difficult to resolve.

Literary representations reveal a similar fate, the striving for a more perfect society that falls short. So far short, in fact, that for the most part they can be characterized as *dystopian*, especially in the 20th century. H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905), Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), *Ape and Essence* (1948), and Island (1962), George Orwell's 1984 (1948), Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), and Anthony Burgess's *1985* (1978), among others, demonstrate how increasingly difficult it is to fashion large-scale utopian experiments given the complexity of industrialization and the limits of liberalism.

Ursula Le Guin's notable story from 1974, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," captures this dilemma. She offers a comparison in the subjunctive mode between the state of American society and a sketch of what a utopian society might look like, her language erupting throughout with reservations. She presents an inventory of negatives about American capitalist society and its institutions, its exploitative stock market and technology, repressive mores, military culture, etc., and provides a humane substitute for each. Omelas is painted as a city infused with aesthetic and natural beauty where complex and intelligent people live caring and tension-free lives. Its excellence is undercut, though, by the presence of an immiserated child, allegorically the underclasses, mostly hidden from view. Enough of the citizens know, however, so that this knowledge spreads. Even though most become aware of this impoverishment, they suppress it, conform to the existing social contract and accept their limited freedom. Though some walk away, and Le Guin questions their motives, she posits the argument that given our existing knowledge about how societies work, there must be those who are excluded.

Whether a mental capture of the past, an experimental possession of a space that conjures it, or one that paints a future of perfection from it, chasing utopia can compound disillusionment and create new uncertainty. Facing up to this limitation, breaking free from a dependency on the idea of utopia, can provide paths to satisfy the need to simplify lifestyles and manage the chaos of our moment. This means coming to a realization that there are ways to survive in the present free of a fixation on nostalgia or the future. This means accepting the chaos and uncertainty of the present as limits we confront from day to day.

Albert Camus provided insight into this dilemma in his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It was written at a moment of crisis, during the early years of World War II. He felt—feelings were paramount for Camus, rejecting the role of absolute reason—that the world we live in is absurd, that it is always absurd with respect to the meaning of life. His notion of the absurd is defined as a clash between our constant need for clarity, purpose, and order, and a world that offers no clear answer, no final meaning, since it remains unreasonable and silent. It arises in the tension between a mind that wants meaning and a universe that gives none back. Now he was an atheist, a thinker associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and historical Existentialism, so he nixed the dependence on external and higher meanings—essences—that many who are captured by the chaos are tempted to embrace, along with a belief in rational progress, hope for the future, and nostalgic throwbacks. Any escape from or leap to a space away from the absurd present, even suicide itself, constitutes intellectual dishonesty. According to Camus, "The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man."

The absurd man practices absurd reasoning, which is a way of thinking that means refusing to escape. He keeps facing the struggle, acting consciously to manage the chaos and uncertainty, accepting that meaning is not forthcoming. Like Sisyphus fated to roll a rock up a hill repeatedly, in perpetuity, he comes to realize that nothing will ever change this equation. It is in this realization that this limit is transcended, enabling life to be lived freely and passionately.

The big question here is how one comes to this realization. How does one develop the consciousness to grasp this situation? Not everyone possesses the psychic



maturity. Many are lost in the routines of everyday life and can't gain perspective until the "stage sets"—the heretofore unseen scaffolding that sustains one's existence—collapse. Then the victim becomes the absurd man, ready to revolt against all imposed meanings. This state is Camus' absurdly-rational "utopia" where the absurd man lives day to day, moment to moment, responsibly and with integrity, in an ethical realm beyond the ordinary markers of good and evil.

This alternative to escapism, however, which clearly broaches the philosophy of existentialism, is confined to the ethic of individualism. Can true freedom and stability be secured through this ethic? Is this sufficient to navigate through the clutter and chaos, tune out the noise and confusion and achieve stability and certainty? Camus' absurd hero acts aggressively to keep up the struggle to live lucidly in the present, but he's an isolated individual who performs strictly through his own efficacy, fearing that the wills of others might impose essences—divine or pre-determined meanings from outside one's subjectivity, etc.—on his capacity to act. However important it is for the absurd man to power his struggle, the experience of being part of a group that meshes the willful can serve as a replacement for "tradition" and repel the urge to escape.

Subcultures could be created where members probe options to survive within the chaos, something an isolated individual is unable to do. These could be housed in creative communities—within or outside of cities and conurbations—where members experiment with how to develop alternatives to the mainstream, the mega-connected global machine that lords over the whims of the willing like Big Brother. With cooperation—outside the corporate profit system—they could develop an enlightened version of AGI through a dark web that gives control to the willing, refusing to submit to neo-Luddite fantasies. This cooperation could extend to the structure of the social mechanism, producing the equivalent of the egalitarianism practiced in pre-agricultural societies, tempering the cost-of-living extremes. Communal living would perhaps flow naturally from this, helping to break down the isolation of the individual. Then add a pinch or more of soul-bonding religiosity to infuse the grouping that's shaped by an honest and diversity-directed morality laced with integrity and faith. And if qualms remain about security and safety, add a bomb shelter.

The end result could surely deliver at least a smidgen of possible perfection, certainly a new conception of progress that the disillusioned can identify with, but no utopia as such since the concept itself negates flawlessness. The best experimental configuration is one that exists within the limits of the possible.



THE ABUNDANCE PARADIGM: WHY AI FORCES A RETHINKING OF MONEY ITSELF PART ONE

ELLEN BROWN

A Universal Basic Income (UBI) has long been proposed as a way to cushion the blow of jobs lost to automation. Under that model, everyone receives a modest monthly payment – enough to cover basic needs and prevent extreme poverty.

But Elon Musk has gone further. On April 16, he posted on X:

"Universal HIGH INCOME via checks issued by the Federal government is the best way to deal with unemployment caused by AI. AI/robotics will produce goods & services far in excess of the increase in the money supply, so there will not be inflation."

Rather than a subsistence stipend, Universal High Income (UHI) would be a level of income allowing ordinary people to live well in a world where machines do most of the work. Musk has also said that AI and robotics are the only things that can solve the massive U.S. debt crisis.

That sounds promising, but where will the government get the money to pay the UHI? Critics say any government that tried it would go bankrupt. There are also other concerns, which will be addressed in Part 2 of this article. Here we will look at the financial underpinnings: why UHI is even thinkable, why AI forces a reexamination of how money enters the economy, why the current system cannot scale to meet what is coming, and the implicit transition needed to meet that challenge.

Why the Current Money System Cannot Scale

The national debt of the U.S. government just topped $39 trillion. China's is $18.7 trillion. Japan's is $8.6 trillion. Those of the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain are each in the multi-trillion-dollar range. Collective global debt now stands at $353 trillion, 305% of the world's annual economic output. So even if, hypothetically, everything produced in the world in a year were applied toward liquidating the debt, it still would not be enough to pay it all off.

In fact the debt can never be repaid, because of the way money currently enters the system. Nearly all of the money supply today is created by banks when they make loans. Banks do not lend their existing capital. The loan itself creates the money. The bank adds the loan amount to the asset side of its balance sheet and balances that sum with the same amount on the liability side. When the borrower withdraws or transfers the funds, either the bank takes them from its reserves in "vault cash" or the Federal Reserve debits the bank's digital reserve account at the central bank. But the lending bank typically has funds coming into its reserve account at about the same rate as they are going out, so its reserves are continually replenished. Thus a very small reserve account can support a much larger money creation engine. For decades before the Fed discontinued the reserve requirement in 2020, it hovered at around 10%.

In a normal economy, issuing more money simply increases the dollar price of the existing output of goods & services, meaning people do NOT get more stuff.

– Ellen Brown

The chief problem with this debt-based system is the interest which the bank does not create in its original loan. For a typical long-term loan, interest can double the total tab or more. Where is the money to come from to pay this added liability? Across the system as a whole, it must either come from more borrowing or from existing funds. In the case of governments, that means issuing interest-bearing bonds or tapping taxes and other revenues. The interest on the debt compounds, meaning the government is paying interest on interest. This makes the debt increase exponentially, until it is mathematically unsustainable. Then bankruptcies occur, of banks or even whole governments. Booms turn into busts, and the cycle begins again.

Today, interest on the federal debt is the second largest budget line item after Social Security, exceeding $1 trillion. Meanwhile, workers are losing jobs to AI/robotics, shrinking the income tax base. The system is clearly unsustainable.

How to Raise Demand to Scale to the Upcoming Supply

A Universal High Income would replenish the shrinking tax base by replacing the lost wages of unemployed workers. But where will the money come from to pay the UHI? The only sustainable solution is for the government to issue it interest-free. That does not mean through the Federal Reserve, which creates money in the same way banks do: it buys federal interest-bearing securities with accounting entries. The Fed collects the

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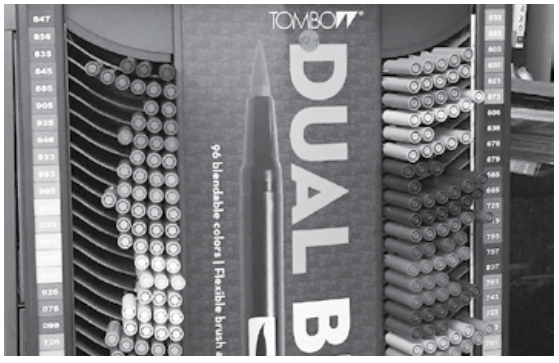
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interest which it is supposed to return to the Treasury after deducting its costs. But since 2008, its costs include paying interest on the reserves of its participating banks, which consumes its profits.

The only interest-free, debt-free solution that will actually increase the money supply sufficiently to match the projected productivity of AI/robotics is for the money to be issued directly by the Treasury.

This is not a radical new idea. It is authorized in the U.S. Constitution, which provides in Article 1, Sec. 8, that "The Congress shall have Power To … coin Money [and] regulate the Value thereof …." Abraham Lincoln used government-issued "Greenbacks" to avoid a crippling debt to British-backed bankers. Debt-free government-issued money was also the funding mechanism by which the American colonists succeeded in creating a thriving economy and liberating themselves from the oppressive yoke of the British Empire.

In his 1729 pamphlet "A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency," Benjamin Franklin argued that a lack of currency was a tax on industrious farmers and producers, and that a reliable, locally issued paper currency was the "oil" for the gears of trade. The "Nature and Necessity" of this currency was to facilitate the movement of goods between neighbors. Franklin observed that the British strategy of keeping the colonies short of cash was a method of economic suppression. By forcing the colonies to use gold and silver, which were constantly drained back to London to pay for imports, the Crown kept the colonies in a state of permanent debt and low productivity. When the money supply matched the productive capacity of the people, universal prosperity resulted without inflation.

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This logic evolved into the "American System of Political Economy" championed by Henry Carey, economic advisor to Abraham Lincoln. He wrote:

"Two systems are before the world… One looks to pauperism, ignorance, depopulation, and barbarism; the other in increasing wealth, comfort, intelligence, combination of action, and civilization. … One is the English system; the other we may be proud to call the American system, for it is the only one ever devised the tendency of which was that of elevating while equalizing the condition of man throughout the world."

In the context of the 21st century, the "oil" that best lowers the friction of trade is debt-free government-issued money similar to Lincoln's Greenbacks and colonial scrip. Rather than implementing a radical financial innovation, we would be returning to our roots.

Inflation or Deflation?

The chief objection to the colonies' paper "scrip" was that they tended to over-print, so that "demand" (money) outstripped supply. Too much money chasing too few goods produced price inflation. But in the 21st century, we will soon have the opposite problem: too little money chasing too many goods. Machines don't need food, clothing, shelter, transportation, medical treatment or other services. So who will buy those goods and services?

Money needs to be issued to human consumers, and not just to a few wealthy human consumers serving as debt brokers thriving on interest. To create sufficient demand for the voluminous output of AI/robotics, it needs to go to the whole national population, evenly distributed. Not only can UHI work in that sort of abundant supply without producing price inflation; it is actually essential to prevent deflation.

In a conversation on X, Musk wrote:

"In a normal economy, issuing more money simply increases the dollar price of the existing output of goods & services, meaning people do NOT get more stuff. If AI/robotics massively increase goods & services output, then you actually MUST issue dollars to people or there will be massive disinflation."

As paraphrased on Yahoo Finance (reposted from Benzinga), Musk wrote that handing out more dollars becomes a problem only when the economy's supply of goods and services fails to surge alongside the money supply. His claim is that AI and robotics could lift production so sharply that the bigger risk would be falling prices, not rising ones.

But aren't falling prices a good thing? In this case, no. Prices would be falling due to a lack of demand, meaning producers can't find customers for their products. They wind up laying off workers and eventually going bankrupt. When spread across the whole economy, the result is a deflationary spiral: prices fall, businesses lose revenue, and the economy contracts, not because production is inadequate but because purchasing power is insufficient. The result is recession or depression. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, food was rotting in the fields while people were starving because they were out of work and had no money to spend.

Job cuts from AI are already happening. According to the same Benzinga article:

"Evidence of near-term strain is showing up in corporate announcements: employers disclosed more than 27,000 job cuts linked to AI in the first quarter of 2026, according to Challenger, Gray & Christmas. The outplacement firm said that figure was up 40% from the same period a year earlier."

Robert Reich reports that wages are around two-thirds of the typical corporation's total cost, and that in the first four months of 2026, big U.S. corporations cut over 128,000 jobs.

How Soon Will All This Happen?

Another Benzinga article, reposted on Yahoo Finance on March 16, detailed Musk's projected time frame: Speaking remotely to the Abundance Summit last week, Musk told XPRIZE founder Peter Diamandis that the global economy is on the verge of an explosion so massive it defies historical precedent.

"I'd say the economy is 10 times its current size in 10 years," Musk said, before quickly clarifying that the growth could be even more explosive. "Greater than," he added, framing the projected shift in economic output as a "fairly comfortable prediction…Obviously if there's like World War III or something, that could put a kink in those plans or those expectations," Musk warned. "But in the absence of World War III, if current trends continue, I would say the economy 10xes in 10 years. The catalyst for this vertical climb isn't traditional manufacturing or trade, but the "hard takeoff" of artificial intelligence. Musk explained that civilization is currently moving through a period of recursive self-improvement, where AI models are increasingly being used to design and build their successors.

Ray Kurzweil, author of *The Singularity Is Near,* sees AI reaching Artificial General Intelligence (human-level intelligence across virtually all domains) by 2029, and full transformative abundance by 2045.

Other experts question these time projections, but a radical transformation of traditional manufacturing and trade is likely to happen sometime in the reasonably near future. The question is, will the money system transition soon enough to rescue all the laid-off workers from homelessness and famine?

The Sovereign Wealth Fund Alternative

There is another model for distributing the gains of automation, one that can be phased in gradually as the AI workforce expands. It comes from Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI. In an ironic twist, Altman and Musk, who jointly founded OpenAI in 2015, are now locked in a high-profile legal battle over whether Altman diverted Musk's $44 million investment to transform what was conceived as a nonprofit "for the benefit of humanity" into a highly lucrative for-profit enterprise.

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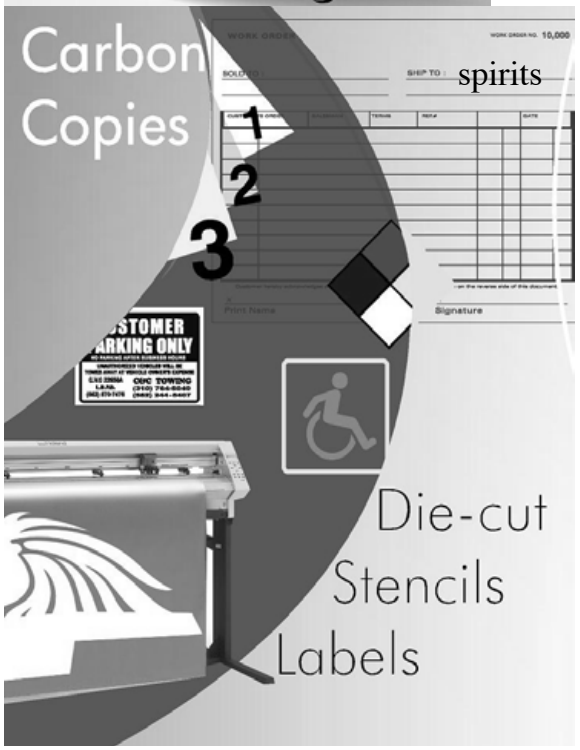
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That dispute aside, Altman's alternative model for sharing AI-generated wealth is a national sovereign wealth fund seeded by the profits of AI and robotics. His proposed American Equity Fund would take public stakes in the companies and technologies driving automation, capture a portion of the resulting productivity gains, and distribute them as universal dividends. The Fund would not replace a Universal High Income but would complement it.

This approach has several advantages. It ties payments directly to real output, scales automatically with productivity, and can be introduced gradually, avoiding the shock of issuing large payments before the supply side has fully expanded. It would resemble the Alaska Permanent Fund, which distributes oil revenues to residents, except that here the resource would be the most powerful general-purpose technology since electricity.

Conclusion: A New Monetary Logic for a New Productive Era

For centuries, money has been issued as a claim against the future productivity of human labor, repaid from the income that labor generates. The logic of this debt-based system collapses when machines become the primary producers of goods and services. Then the limiting factor becomes purchasing power — the ability of human beings to access the abundance their own technologies create. That requires a monetary architecture that expands with output rather than debt and distributes income not through wages alone but through mechanisms tied to the productive capacity of the whole system.

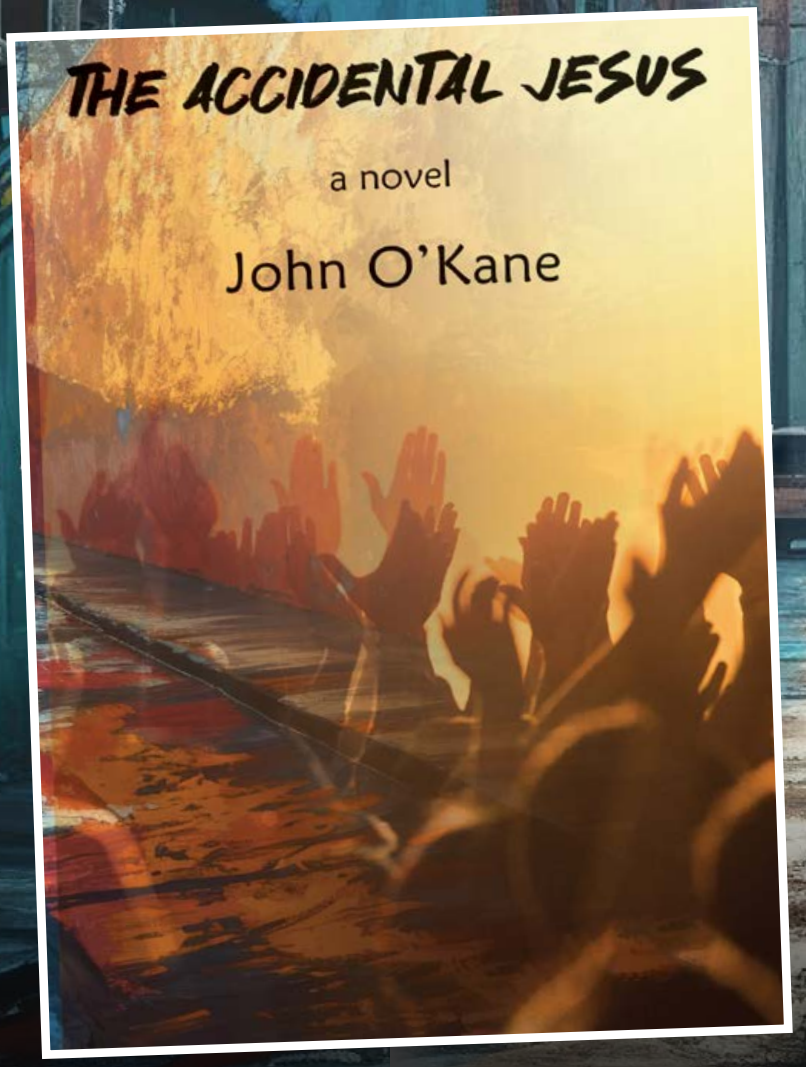
Universal High Income and a sovereign wealth fund are two ways of doing that. One ensures a stable floor of demand; the other ensures that the public shares in the gains of automation. Both would be grounded in real production. But for the public to have access to those gains, the money supply needs to expand in proportion to the expanding pool of goods and services. This can be done by restoring the innovation our forefathers baked into the Constitution: debt-free money issued by the government itself.

How to fund a UHI without triggering inflation or driving the government into bankruptcy is the first objection critics raise, but there are others. They argue that people would stop working or stop learning, that society would collapse into idleness or chaos, that life would lose meaning without jobs, that the government would have the power to control how people spend their money. Will a UHI ring in the promised utopia or lock us into a state-controlled digital prison? Part 2 of this article will address those concerns.

Ellen Brown is an attorney, founder of the Public Banking Institute, and author of thirteen books including *Web of Debt, The Public Bank Solution,* and *Banking on the People: Democratizing Money in the Digital Age.* Her 400+ blog articles are posted at EllenBrown.com.



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TRANSCENDING THE TRUMP OBSESSION

JOHN O'KANE

As the Trump administration bulls into its second year, we await a movement that will aggressively challenge and potentially replace it. What we have now is a promising prelude to one in the guise of the anti-ICE protests and the No Kings rallies (Bernie Sanders' Fighting Oligarchy tour was an influential catalyst). These are essentially pop-up, short-lived events, snuffed by the Epstein files but recharged by the Iran War. They've been piecemeal, limited strains of agitation until now, but this could change if the anti-war forces continue to strengthen. Even then, though, they'll need to combine forces and expand to produce the kind of lasting, pro-activist organization that will lead to real change. And they'll also have to shed the anti-Trump obsession in play since Trump was first elected.

Though there is certainly no firm correspondence between the Democratic Party and these valued protesters, the noise from these agitated strains recycles much of the rhetoric and tactics that have dogged it since Trump was first elected. There are obviously a wealth of reasons to reject Trump. But the crisis of leadership in the Democratic Party that helped Trump win in 2024 persists. The anti-Trump obsession has smothered the sorely needed attention to what is necessary to replace him.

Led by Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries, the Democratic Party floundered on who to target in the 2024 election, finally deciding that it didn't need the working class to win. Aside from the provocative cultural issues, which clearly separated it from the Republicans, the Democrats could barely distinguish itself from them economically, firmly indebted to Wall Street and the neo-liberal agenda. The loss of the working class sealed their defeat (Now Jeffries is full of support for the working class but refused to endorse Zohran Mamdani for Mayor of New York City until just before the election, clearly a meek last resort).

The anti-Trump obsession is reflected in the abolish ICE fixation. The rhetorical and activist level of energy evident in the protests would seem to suggest that the numbers of deported and detained during the past months of the Trump administration have been strikingly high. But the data reveal that Barack Obama deported and detained significantly more bodies than Donald Trump. And in 2024, Joe Biden deported and detained more than Donald Trump has during any year as president.

How do we explain the relative protest calm during the Democrat administrations compared to the recent months of the Trump administration?

The number of sanctuary cities is surely a factor. These legally designated zones welcome immigrants and migrants who are potential targets of ICE, along with activists who help in crafting strategies of resistance. These zones have grown substantially since the years of the Obama administration (they actually predate it, the post-9/11 backlash against "foreigners," especially those from Muslim countries, spawning the first installment). There were approximately 40 such jurisdictions in 2009, very early in the Obama administration, over 300 by 2016 and just over a thousand by May 2025.

How do we explain the relative protest calm during the Democrat administrations compared to the recent months of the Trump administration?

– John O'Kane

With significantly fewer sanctuary cities, Obama faced little organized resistance. But there was also a reluctance to criticize his actions and policies, especially early in his tenure, because he was the first African-American president and he possessed liberal credentials to boot. His history and identity, crafted consummately by select media, delivered the perception of inclusiveness and humanity. Reactions to his policies of deportation and detention, though more severe than those under the current Trump administration, were muted. The greater presence of sanctuary cities, however, can't explain the severity of ICE's tactics in Minneapolis and elsewhere which must be rooted out.

Trump's ascendance to the presidency in 2016 spawned waves of resistance from the remnants of the liberal coalition and a spike in sanctuary cities. His anti-migrant position (with respect to countries located in the Global South, that is), was well known. Plus, if Obama was the Deporter in Chief, Trump was surely the Bloviator in Chief. His rhetoric was inflammatory and racist, creating the perception that his policies were more threatening than Obama's. He was an easy target for those who had little sympathy for a reactionary. The "fake news" took him to task.

The "invasion" of migrants during the Biden

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ascendancy clearly tested the patience of American citizens, giving conservatives beholden to Trump an issue that would vault him back into the White House. For most of Biden's time in office, migrants crossed the border in huge numbers relatively unchecked. A significant number of these were asylum seekers. The Biden administration reversed the Trump policy in play during his first term which kept the seekers of asylum in Mexico while their cases were being adjudicated. It wasn't until the resistance to "open borders" on the part of a sizable majority of citizens reached a virtual breaking point that the Biden administration shifted gears. In 2024 it succumbed to this pressure and out-performed Trump. But this proceeded with little protest against ICE itself or its tactics which were muted significantly by the lack of pressure from sanctuary cities.

The recent excesses of ICE distort its nominal mission to fairly minister justice in accord with the country's legacy of welcoming a diversity of the planet's beings searching for a better life. It must be remembered that the stream of migrants coming to the US in recent years have come from countries—Venezuela, Cuba, and Guatemala, mainly—that have been decimated by repressive sanctions. This legacy does not concur with punishing victims.

But the refrain to abolish ICE smacks of the same sentiments that fed the "defund the police" movement that surfaced in response to the George Floyd killing in 2020. Were ICE to be eliminated, we'd be back in the Biden years with "open borders," a policy that set the arriving migrants at odds with the country's perennially deprived citizens over resources, health care and education especially (I'll return to the issue of resources later). This war persists.

Similarly, with the actual "defund-the-police" movement, the decreasing presence of police on the streets victimized many of the people they were designed to protect. And in subsequent years we've witnessed excessive speeding on the highways and streets due to this withdrawal, resulting in numerous unfortunate deaths. New types of property crimes have emerged as well, like "smash-and-grab" burglaries that benefit from glitches in policing routines. The dearth of resources in the hands of the police has led to a policy that prioritizes the investigation of major crimes to the detriment of the common everyday ones that most people are impacted by.

We need radical reform of ICE and all policing authorities!

What's replaced badly needed discussions to reset the agenda for the Democratic Party that will capture the voters who either didn't vote at all in the 2024 election or flipped to the Republicans is the inflammatory attention to limited issues like the fact—or feeling, actually—that we're now living in, or soon will be, a fascist system that has supposedly gripped the country under this Republican administration. Or that Donald Trump is a king or at least on the way to becoming one. These two issues comprise the substance of what constitutes the resistance to the drift of the Trump administration. They are clearly interconnected, focused on the dangers of increasing authoritarian control.

Fascism. Well, Trump's bombing of Iran within a few days of delivering his State of the Union address, a performance that assured us by default what his poll numbers projected, that his domestic policies were failing, conjures the fascist scenario in George Orwell's 1984 where the ruling elite manufactures wars against other nations to defer attention from its brutal impoverishment of those below. (The sales of this book spiked with Trump's ascendance.) If this war continues long enough and the authoritarian controls that sustain conflicts of this nature seed, they may be difficult to extract once normality returns. The name change from the Department of Defense to the Department of War signaled that an Orwellian military hegemony might be on the horizon. And the leader of this renamed bureau, Pete Hegseth, through his words, appearance, and gestures, conjures imagery from the Nazi archives.

Trump's menacing expression, offhanded comments about the holocaust, humiliating bluster, and obsession to eliminate Antifa, the activist organization committed to extricating all facets of fascist culture and society, make his bypass of legalities, arrogance toward Congress, and volume of executive orders all the more threatening. His overall behavioral bent has likely spawned a series of Kanye Wests.

And there's an epidemic of meanness unleashed in the society, evident even before Trump. People seem conditioned to mistreat each other, surely due in part to the corporatization of everyday life that has squelched so many democratic initiatives and structures and fomented forms of resentment. It is so cool to be mean. So it's no surprise that the Trump team's nostalgia for better times includes the Roman Empire, identifying with its hardened autocratic males and not those who were democratically inclined from the Roman Republic.

In terms of policies, the "Big Beautiful Bill" crystallized meanness. It has further disenfranchised many more of the lower and middle classes through budget cuts that restrict access to the IRS, the courts, consumer protections, among others. The Nazis structured their system similarly to increase their power over the masses. This bill's elimination of subsidies for healthcare has effectively murdered people.

These symptoms are a dire warning for sure, especially the imaging and inflammatory rhetoric. But the large-scale reorganization of society that the Nazis manufactured is at bay for the moment.

The masked ICE guards in Minneapolis may look and feel like storm troopers, and their behaviors need to be eliminated, but ultimately their egregious excesses were pushed back by protesters and responsible authorities were sacked. The very presence of protesters in such large numbers around the country constitutes one of many countervailing forces against further challenges to democracy. Hopefully, crackdowns on the right to protest will not surface in the future.

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GLOBAL REAL ESTATE ADVISOR
562-506-4794
ENGEL & VÖLKERS NEWPORT BEACH
3636 EAST COAST HIGHWAY
CORONA DEL MAR, CA 92625

AMY.HLAD@EVREALESTATE.COM
AMYHLADREALESTATE.COM
DRE# 01967236

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already noticeable in Trump's first term but especially now with the Republican capture of the three branches of government. On the presidential level, the number of Trump's executive orders tell the story. Since he took office a little over a year ago, he has signed nearly three times as many as Biden did in his full four years, many of them legally questionable.

The Congress's actions are mostly in lockstep with Trump's designs, but both houses are owned by the Republicans, giving it the authority to comfortably pass the "Big Beautiful Bill" with its list of changes that have been fancied ever since the Goldwater defeat in 1964 and the rise of the new right. The Machiavellian mojo that delivered and defended this bill insulted the majority of Americans, especially the poor and marginalized. It even shut down the government instead of considering a compromise over sizable cuts to Obama Care (ACA). There were also substantial cuts to Medicaid and other programs servicing the poor and marginalized, along with the burden of increased taxes on this segment of the population. This brutality was authorized by a party that owns the government and faces little opposition from a Democratic Party that caved to its demands and ended the shutdown. Its overtures to nationalize elections (possibly even to cancel them) are especially unsettling, as are the arbitrary redistricting moves around the country and the voter suppression measures.

And, aside from the recent Supreme Court decision that handed Trump a defeat regarding the tariffs, its conservative majority has strongly supported Trump.

A weak Democratic Party opened the gates for the Republican Party in 2024, and they haven't made inroads since, as suggested above (if the consequences of the Iran War become especially dire, this may change by the mid-terms). It has yet to craft an identity sufficient to entice independent voters and those who crossed over to the Republicans (many now MAGA diehards). They'll likely not be convinced by the fascism claims. The state of the Democratic Party in this run-up recalls how Hitler's National Socialist Party rose from the weakness of Weimar liberalism, its early 1930s equivalent in Germany.

Given this authoritarian drift, the No Kings rallies are encouraging. They draw attention to Trump's transgressions for sure along with a litany of other urgent issues the country is facing, as the most recent event demonstrated. But again, the real king is a swatch of vested interests sustaining the Republican consensus. If Trump the candidate for king were removed, we'd be rid of the pompously polar head of the monster, but its toxic organs would likely continue to pacify these same interests through a consortium of kingly clones dedicated to survival.

There's no question that these events and the protests against ICE are catalysts to keep the issues that matter alive for a cross-section of citizens (and it's revealing that such a diversity of issues is represented at the events). But success at replacing this consensus will need to develop an organization that weaves the diversity of issues into a coalition which can identify the causes of this current dysfunction and design a plan to expose and root them out. What enabled this consensus to succeed in the first place? What can be done to erase it?

The Republican consensus didn't emerge when Trump was first elected. Identifying fundamental causes must begin with a look at how we got here. Barry Goldwater's break with the Republican consensus of the mid-!960s enabled the rise of the new and more radical right. The agenda that Goldwater fancied remained just that as the liberalism of the Democratic Party marked the decade. It was the conservative turn of the mid-to-late 70s, especially the Republican capture of Congress in 1978, that prepped the political ground for Ronald Reagan's ascendance and his institutionalizing of this agenda. The seeding of these gains for some thirty-five years has shaped the consciousness about what is politically acceptable.

The Reagan revolution jettisoned the vestiges of Keynesian economics, especially its support for fiscal buffers to ameliorate the deficiencies of monetarism, and canonized the Milton Friedman/Friedrich Von Hayek formalization of Adam Smith's economic liberalism, stripping it of a moral/social conscience. This theory claimed that once capital flowed freely among the elite, the increased profitability from its efficient placement would filter down to the rest of society. It effectively became the arbiter of value for the whole. The public sector, the avowed enemy of wealth creation, had to be pared back. The private sector, where wealth is consummated, had to be expanded. Privatization became the engine of progress. It fostered the idea that all goods and services should be subject to the market, commodified, so that the owners of capital could seek ever new profit sources. The owners pushed the idea that a free market delivers the best options, but many of these players virtually control their markets. The public sector was targeted. Privatizing what was once under the purview of governments was another source, but this was also about efficiency, paring away waste and eliminating welfare. The public sector fostered laziness and extracted subsidies from hard working taxpayers, they claimed. The corporatization of education and healthcare we live with now has been an unfortunate result.

One of the most damaging elements of this agenda was the industry deregulation mania of the 1980s, especially the severe weakening of anti-trust enforcement we owe to the above-mentioned rightward turn. Though spawned from Republican policies that, predictably, sold the notion of increased prosperity for all if government would simply let the corporations do what is necessary to fatten the bottom line, the Clinton and Obama administrations went with the drift (the Biden years witnessed a revival in enforcement). Mergers and acquisitions reaped great benefits for Wall Street, but they led to downsizing, which translated into the loss of good jobs and the weakening of unions, actions that exacerbated the already widening inequality gap.

The easing of bank regulations in the late

1990s led to speculation in property and contributed substantially to the 2008-9 financial crisis where millions of borrowers suffered financial reversals from foreclosures (often due to usurious loan rates). But the victims were blamed and the banks were bailed out. This in turn enabled the beneficiaries of these rewards to grab bargain-sale properties and flip them for future gains. Financial downturns foster fortunes. This also exacerbated the already widening inequality gap.

During this same period—the late years of the Clinton administration—the oil industry underwent a massive consolidation wave where super-sized companies gobbled up much of the competition. An oligopoly market resulted where excess prices were eventually passed onto consumers. This helps us understand how and why this industry in crisis after crisis gouges consumers with high prices at will, despite evidence that they didn't have to.

The industry's profits during the pandemic quadrupled. And since fuel, especially diesel, is what greases the transportation circuits that deliver goods and services, inflation skyrocketed. At this moment we're witnessing the same result. Within a matter of hours when the Iran War began, the industry jacked up prices, expecting us to believe that their costs had risen overnight when ample reserves already exist. Four years of reserves to be exact. Plus, the U.S. is an exporter of oil. The damage to society is irreparable. Why does the industry pass on the total cost to consumers? Why can't it be patriotic! Inflation hits those at the bottom of the economic ladder the hardest, those without assets and the power to pass the costs onto someone else, especially through the rise in interest rates for credit cards, mortgages, and many other things needed for survival. Top-down, authoritarian, neo-liberal power creates victims. The effect of profiteering is the further widening of the inequality gap.

It's notable that some European countries have begun investigations into profiteering over the oil crisis and even rolled out programs to support their victims. It reveals the persistence of a moral social conscience, a residue of Keynes, that counters the falsity of market purity. Why should people be forced to take a hit on their resources or credit because an elite or committee of elites made an arbitrary decision to satisfy a power whim or vested interests? They have no control over what these power brokers do. Immune from prosecution, they're free to extract wealth from those who barely have any.

The amassing of wealth from the entrenchment of the neo-liberal machine over the years has been put to good use in funding lobbyists and PACs and new media organizations that manage the consent necessary to keep the rewards flowing. This accumulation of influence has secured a sufficient number of judges and representatives and players to ensconce the ideology that this wealth has been created by the elite exclusively and therefore they should have more power in shaping elections. The gist of the Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court decision in 2010. This case effectively monetized freedom of speech, giving the elite the power to shape elections with virtually unlimited funds and "dark money," overturning campaign finance laws on the books since the reforms of the post-Watergate era. And it spiked the number of billionaires.

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With a neo-liberal machine awash in an ever-expanding trove of conspicuous wealth, the interests that are vested in it will inevitably find ways to exert influence over people's lives. The real tragedy here is that capital, unchecked by countervailing benevolence, expands exponentially, creating ever more distance between these interests and these ever more weakened lives. This is indeed a threat to democracy.

The statistics are striking. Just a few years after neo-liberalism became the prevailing economic doctrine by Milton Friedman and the Chicago School, the inequality gap has spiked. The top one percent owned roughly twenty three percent of total household wealth in the mid-1970s. Today, it owns nearly thirty one percent of total household wealth. Its wealth, roughly $55.8 trillion, is equivalent to the wealth held by the bottom 90% of households.

The claim that market purity monetarism filters down the wealth created by the super wealthy to this bottom ninety percent has been roundly refuted by numerous studies, but it remains firmly lodged in the minds of people who want to believe in the ever more elusive piece of the American Dream. The mythology that wealth increasing through the wits of the elite lifts all boats drowns from the fact that the people must bear the expenses for the mushrooming of new yachts.

A protest movement that can succeed in producing real change must remove this disease and reverse its effects.

The material deficits are striking. The "affordability" crisis has not just erupted. This meme, mocked by Trump as meaningless, diverts attention from the issue of how economic lack is structured into the neo-liberal economy. This is reflected in the off-handed "solutions" to it offered by the Democrats, all stopgap, temporary measures, the equivalent of subsidies and rebates, those sending the message that victims deserve assistance despite the taint of blame. The Biden administration's pandemic spending spree demonstrated this. It sent millions if not billions out to a diversity of people and groups, intending to stabilize the economy and enable them to survive the crisis. It was mostly well intended. But there was little accountability attached to the stopgap resources. A real solution to that "affordability" crisis would have created assets for the most deserving, permanent stashes of wealth that can expand throughout people's lives (shares in a public bank, the ability to purchase property at fair rates of interest, etc.). If people own, they don't feel like recipients of welfare or philanthropy. They'll feel more integrated into their communities. Higher productivity results, according to Keynes, when people are included, given a greater share of the wealth they help create. This clearly extends to wages. Data from the period stretching from the end of WWII through the early 1970s documents this higher productivity rate that existed before the turn to market purity monetarism.

According to William Barber, Director of the Poor People's Campaign founded by Martin Luther King, roughly sixty percent of the working populace lives paycheck to paycheck. This "affordability" issue can't be resolved through temporary stopgap measures.

The wealth extracted through this market purity "revolution" alone could fund a single payer healthcare system that would cancel the need for Medicaid; a program that could assimilate more migrants and create paths for the undocumented to secure immediate citizenship; affordable college education for the lower and middle classes; resources to combat climate change and needed investment in infrastructure and green energy, to mention the most urgent issues.

While awaiting this dream to materialize, a reform of the tax system would be an encouraging initiative. One that would restore progressivity to the code, lift the burden from the lower and middle classes and make the highest earners pay their share. The tax structure we had in the post-WWII years all the way to the Reagan administration's major overhaul would be a great template. The tax rates in effect through the Eisenhower administration—especially the income tax bracket: around 90 percent for the top earners until the early 1960s, roughly 70 percent thereafter until Reagan dropped it to roughly 30 percent—helped build the middle class and make serious gains in eliminating poverty. Residues of Keynesian economics, these transfers were funneled into programs that provided down payments for first-time homeowners in the 1950s; job opportunities through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Job Corps, Head Start); the Food Stamp Act (1964); massive federal aid for housing and education; and the Social Security Amendments of 1965 that created Medicare and Medicaid.

These changes also freed up resources for speculation and investment which led to a spike in property values and endemic homelessness. But the lost revenue from this transfer of wealth led to severe budget cuts at all levels of government, leading to the abrupt release of mental health patients and others onto the streets without prospects, compounding the homeless problem.

The progressive reform of the tax code is necessary to cease the expropriation of wealth by the billionaire class. The very existence of billionaires attests to the flaws of the neo-liberal machine. A tax on billionaires, like that proposed by Bernie Sanders and others, would be welcome but would ultimately guarantee their continued existence.

The odds that the political establishment will initiate the move to replace neo-liberalism or even overhaul it are virtually non-existent. Both the Democrats and the Republicans are vested in this machine and are funded by billionaires. The only path forward is to build a movement with sufficient strength and mass to pressure the insiders in a similar fashion as the activists during the Civil Rights Movement who forced the establishment to convert the Southern Democrats and forge legislation. SDS, a major catalyst for this conversion, mobilized masses of people in support, effectively translating its

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broad-based agenda, connecting the dots, making the links between action and issues. They put persistent pressure on the political players through a variety of strategies, especially direct action, adapted from working with Martin Luther King in the South.

This kind of framework is needed now to gather the at-large strains of agitation together that lack a comprehensive plan—not to mention the lack of numbers--to produce real change.

A retooling of the Occupy Movement from 2011 would provide this framework. It synthesized strategies from King and SDS, and modeled the Zapatistas, the radical group which successfully challenged the propertied elite and the government in Chiapas, Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s. Occupy brought the issue of the one percent into the protest lexicon which Bernie Sanders and other progressives championed. Its direct-action maneuvers spread beyond New York to other urban centers, and the movement seemed primed to make a major impact when a series of coordinated moves by mayors scuttled the project, treating the passioned protestors like homeless squatters. These actions were partially doomed too since they burgeoned in the cold of winter (see my *A People's Manifesto*, 2017).

This framework could easily accommodate an expanded and more complex version of Bernie Sanders' Fighting Oligarchy tour, one more fundamentally and progressively committed to replacing neo-liberalism, if it could demonstrate to the culture of the willing how this machine has managed to work---mostly invisibly---for generations.

John O'Kane publishes and edits AMASS Magazine. His collection of stories, Jukebox Confessionals, is due out this Fall.




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THE FIGHT OVER DATA CENTERS

ASTEAD HERNDON

A recent poll from Gallup shows 70 percent of Americans oppose a data center in their local area, including 48 percent who are strongly opposed. That 70 percent number is tied to several concerns, environmental questions and quality of life chief among them, and it's up 18 percent (!) in just two months, when Gallup asked the same question in March.

Nonetheless, data centers keep going up at a rate that is nothing short of astonishing.

According to one estimate, more than 4,000 data centers have already been built across the country. More than 2,000 that are currently under construction.

That alone shows just how quickly artificial intelligence, workforce automation, and the data centers that power these new technologies are becoming one of the can't-miss issues in our current political landscape. And still, President Donald Trump and the White House have seemingly chosen to stand aside on AI regulation.

On the Democratic side, it's an open question what comes next. Politicians like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) have called for a nationwide moratorium on data centers in order to institute more consumer protections. Others, like Sen. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), are less definitive: He told me recently that artificial intelligence is a "necessary evil" of our modern age, and building data centers is part of that equation.

With all that uncertainty, producer Kasia Broussalian and I decided to sort through the mess ourselves. We headed to Vineland, a city in southern New Jersey where a new data center is under construction.

We talked to homeowners who live near the data center and a Democrat running on an AI reform platform and went to a town hall to hear from community members who wanted to voice their concerns. One person brought up rising electricity bills, while another said the data center has made it impossible for her to sell her home. Many had a general anxiety about the global rise of AI.

However, the most universal complaint was not technically about artificial intelligence at all. It was about a political process that residents said did not include them. At the town hall, people said they were shocked by the data center's initial construction and want more transparency about relationships between elected officials and these big tech companies.

They also urged politicians to act proactively, rather than waiting for a crisis before imposing regulation. It wasn't just that they didn't like the data center itself: They were upset at how it seemed like a physical manifestation of whose interests are prioritized in politics.

Read on for what some of those town hall attendees had to say, lightly edited for length and clarity.

How Many of You Right Now Feel Like You Got Information About the Data Center Before the Construction Started?

No, nobody. Okay.

Can someone raise their hand and just tell me what their biggest concern was once they started hearing about it?

Angela Bardoe, Cumberland County, New Jersey, resident: Well, when I saw it, I thought it was the ugliest thing I've ever seen. So, that part of East Island is beautiful farmland — was beautiful farmland — but then of course I've thought about a lot of my friends that live out that way and how it was going to impact their everyday life.

Most people live there because they love the farmland.

Now I know about the structure, I know about the kind of energy concerns. I wanted to ask about AI generally, like how many of you would say that your concerns about this data center are tied to larger concerns about AI and kind of some anxiety around that.

Fred Barsuglia, Clayton, New Jersey, resident: The internet brought us the best of the world and the worst in the world. AI is going to do the same thing. It's already begun. I scroll through Facebook and there's AI all over the place. Some of it's cute little bunnies and cats, but a lot of the other stuff, you know, is bad.

Again, our government is very slow to react. There has to be some regulations.

Where would you now put this on your scale of issues?

There's so much happening right now, whether it be war in Iran or tariffs or just generally. I wonder where data centers and this specific local reality maps onto your importance of issues.

According to one estimate, more than 4,000 data centers have already been built across the country. More than 2,000 that are currently under construction.

– Astead Herndon

Angela: I would say most of the topics fall into two categories. Is it benefiting people, or is it benefiting the elite and the money that's going into their pockets? We see people trading before the war's announced and they're benefiting from it. And I just find it all very disgusting.

Louise Thigpen, Cumberland County resident: They're gambling.

Angela: Yeah. I mean, they're gambling insider information.

I hear what you're saying.
On one hand there's, there's a kind of politics way of thinking about this in one bucket or another, but you're like, it actually feels like in general, they're not responding to you the regular person, and that's across a lot of issues.

Angela: Well, yes. That's how I see it.

Fred: I feel the same way. It's because everything relates from the top down and what we're getting from the top has spread all the way to the local level.

Louise: And it isn't good.

Thank you all for entertaining our questions. It's illuminating to hear the way these issues are connected for people. And I think just this general sentiment that folks feel unheard.

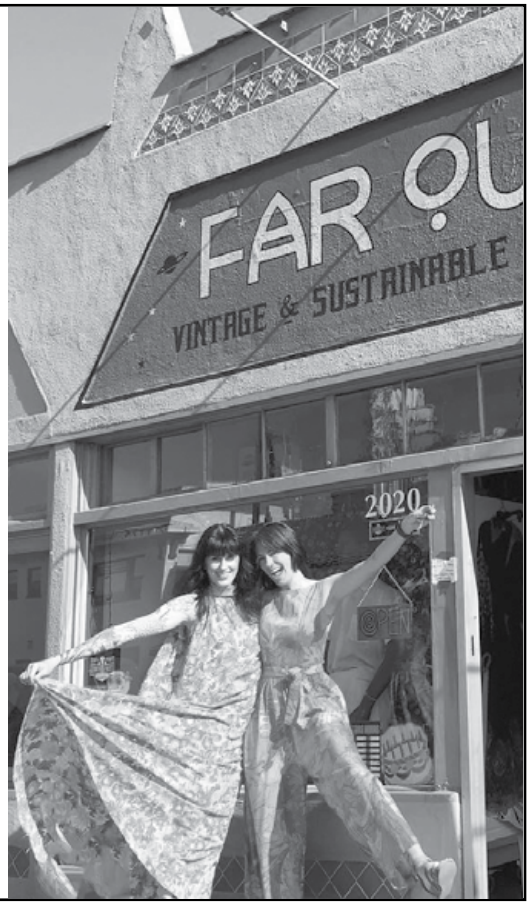
Louise: And we don't feel that way. We are that way.

Astead Herndon writes for *The Conversation* and *Vox*.

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THE CAMPAIGN TO TURN HEALTHY PEOPLE INTO ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS

JEANNE LENZER

When Barbara Feuerstein, 72, saw a Facebook ad offering a free blood test for Alzheimer's disease, she jumped at the opportunity. The ad, placed by a research center, offered the test, recently cleared by the Food and Drug Administration, as part of a drug study to prevent the disease. "I figured it must be safe if it was FDA approved," said Feuerstein.

It surely helped that prominent experts had launched an impressive campaign to convince doctors, the public, and legislators to embrace widespread Alzheimer's testing. In impassioned op-eds published around the country, Robert Redfield, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, proclaimed, "These tests fundamentally change our understanding of the disease, just as the HIV test did for AIDS." At senior communities and other locales across the country, mobile testing vans were offering free blood checks just outside people's doors.

And the Alzheimer's Association, a private institution that funds Alzheimer's research and whose recommendations on the disease are often taken as the final word, has been promoting bipartisan legislation to ensure the test will be covered by Medicare as a screening mechanism for millions of individuals without any memory problems.

But what Feuerstein and millions of others didn't realize was that many of the tests' biggest advocates are being paid millions by the drug and device companies that stand to gain from people taking these tests and opting for preventive drug treatment. These same companies are pushing the Medicare legislation that could radically expand their business.

If such efforts are successful, sales of the new blood tests and drugs could explode. Currently, only 592,000 people are eligible for treatment with the new Alzheimer's drugs. But if the pharmaceuticals are used to prevent rather than treat the disease, the market pool jumps to 47 million Americans.

At the start of the study, Feuerstein was independent and active. But shortly after her third Kisunla dose, the former bookkeeper became confused and unable to walk without assistance.

– Jeanne Lenzer

The campaign is already paying off. A 2025 survey by the Alzheimer's Association found that more than nine out of 10 people would like to take the Alzheimer's blood test so they could start early treatment. Many are already getting tested, either by doctors who order the exams "off label" or by purchasing at-home tests, no prescription necessary. (And while Marty Makary, the FDA Commissioner who oversaw the clearance of the new tests, has now been ousted, there's little reason to suspect his replacement will be any less industry friendly.)

It's true that the new blood tests are "highly accurate" in identifying a biological marker associated with Alzheimer's in people already suffering from dementia. But when they're used to screen for Alzheimer's in people like Feuerstein, who may be a bit forgetful but otherwise cognitively normal, they're less accurate than flipping a coin.

Feuerstein didn't realize this when her blood test turned up the biological marker associated with Alzheimer's, so she agreed to take Kisunla, a "breakthrough" new Alzheimer's drug the study's researchers were testing. She wasn't aware of the drug's questionable efficacy — and didn't realize it could cause disabling and fatal side effects. But she'd soon learn that for herself.

At the start of the study, Feuerstein was independent and active. But shortly after her third Kisunla dose, the former bookkeeper became confused and unable to walk without assistance. She couldn't write her name and had trouble operating her toaster.

A head CT scan showed massive brain swelling — a well-known complication of Kisunla. Following treatment and repeated hospital stays, doctors sent Feuerstein home. Still somewhat confused and struggling with her balance, she walked her dog, Daisy, late one evening and fell in the street, breaking her hip.

"I screamed for help, but no one could hear me," she says. "I thought I was going to die." She lay in the street until 1 a.m., when a passing motorist spotted her.

Feuerstein is far from alone. In the pivotal study of Kisunla, 37 percent of individuals given Kisunla developed brain swelling and hemorrhages. Manufacturers of the new Alzheimer's drugs say these complications are largely "benign

and self-resolving," a determination often made when patients' MRI scans return to normal. But patients like Feuerstein and others tell a different story.

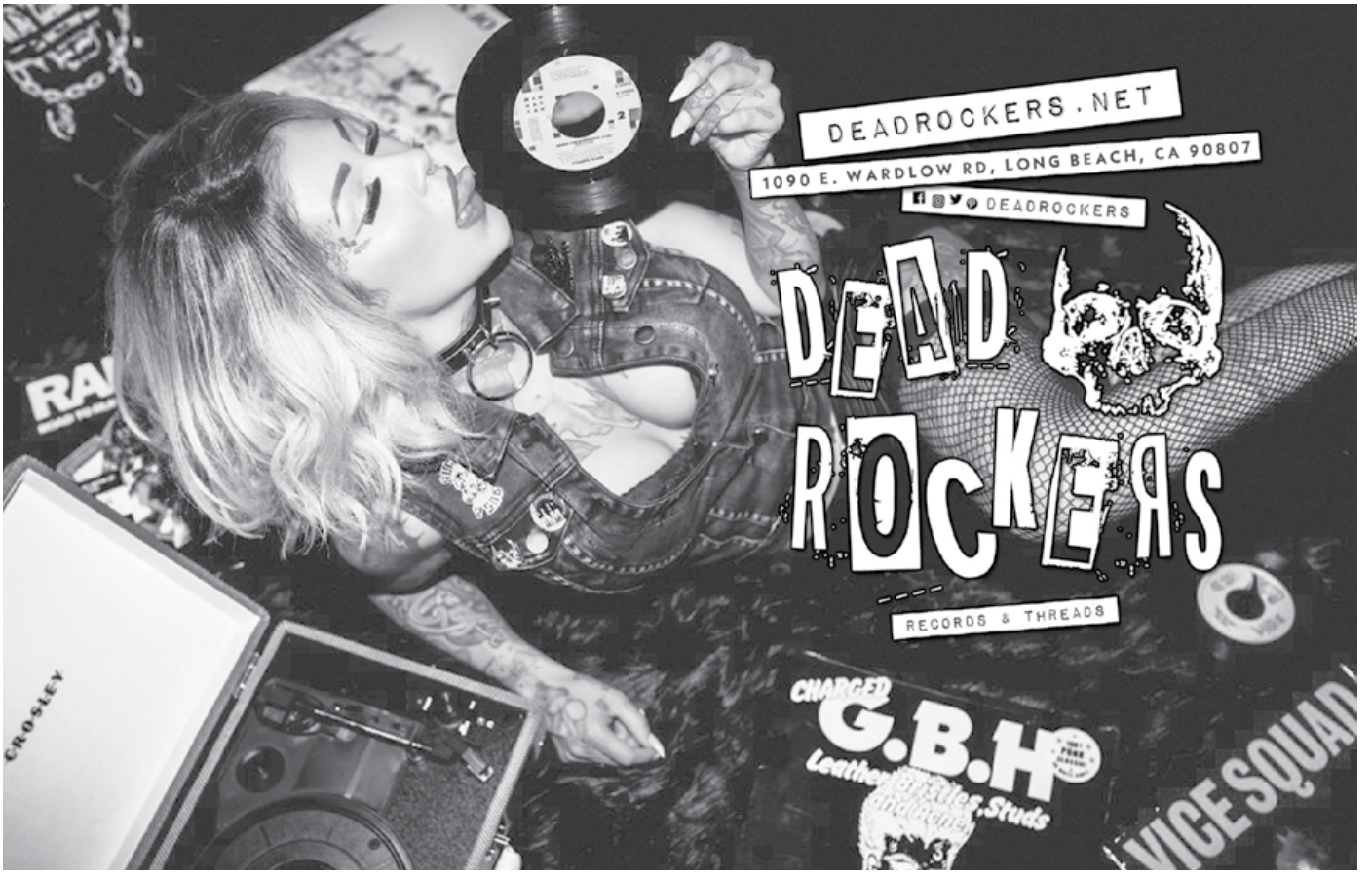
Kristine Shields, 65, developed visual hallucinations, brain swelling, microhemorrhages, and seizures after receiving an experimental anti-amyloid drug in the same class as Kisunla. Like Feuerstein, Shields' recent MRI scans show her brain swelling has resolved, but because of her seizures and brain fog, she lost her job. She also lost her driver's license for eight months and will likely have to take antiepileptic medicines for life.

Some experts worry that even those who don't experience symptoms like Shields and Feuerstein's could still be harmed by such Alzheimer's treatments. Along with sometimes triggering brain hemorrhages and swelling, the drugs are also known to cause brain shrinkage. And government researchers have noted that neurofilament light, a protein that builds up with brain cell death, increased during a clinical trial of Kisunla.

The idea of giving potentially dangerous drugs to people based on a blood test for a disease they might never develop doesn't sit well with George Perry, a neuroscientist and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*. According to Perry, that's like "giving chemotherapy to everyone because they might someday develop cancer."

Jeanne Lenzer writes for *Common Dreams* and other publications.





THE ENEMY SLEEPS BY DAVID A. ROMERO (EL MARTILLO PRESS)

RICHARD MODIANO

David A. Romero's *The Enemy Sleeps* is a suburban California thriller with the pulse of social realism and the teeth of a morality tale. Set in the fictional city of Harper, the novel unfolds like a slow camera pan across a quiet cul-de-sac—until the camera catches something moving in the brush, something feral, and the entire neighborhood begins to feel like a trap.

Romero's achievement is that he writes violence not as spectacle but as consequence. The book is tense, readable, and cinematic, yet it never lets the reader forget that the ugliest horrors are rarely supernatural. They are human. They are institutional. They are inherited.

From the opening moments of the prologue, Romero establishes Harper as a place where nature and civilization are not separate but locked in combat. The coyote in Harper's Canyon is not just an animal but a symbol—an ancient survivor, "one of the last survivors of a pack that had once flourished in the region," now reduced to prey. Romero's prose lingers on the coyote's eye, targeted by "a silver ring" of a Winchester rifle, and in that image the entire novel announces itself: a story about what happens when the powerful decide they have the right to eliminate what makes them uncomfortable.

The hunter Robert Parsons is introduced with a chilling calm. He isn't written as a cartoon villain, but as a recognizable American archetype: working-class masculinity, entitlement to land, entitlement to dominance. His muttered line—"There'll be a lot more of them if I don't get her now"—could apply just as easily to coyotes as to immigrants, the poor, or anyone deemed invasive. Romero knows exactly what he's doing. The coyote is a metaphor that keeps returning, shifting shape, until it becomes inseparable from the human story.

Even Robert's son Neal, silently sharpening his knife beside him, becomes an omen. The knife is described as Neal's "most prized possession," and Romero makes sure we notice the ritual of sharpening, the quietness, the obedience. The child is being groomed into the same worldview: domination as tradition.

The book is tense, readable, and cinematic, yet it never lets the reader forget that the ugliest horrors are rarely supernatural.

– Richard Modiano

One of the novel's greatest strengths is Romero's attention to physical detail, particularly in domestic spaces. In Chapter 1, when Michael Martinez surveys his new neighborhood on Indian Run, Romero gives us the tract-home landscape in sharp suburban realism—dew on the newspaper, the smell of manure carried on the breeze, the "manufactured perfection" of a community that promises safety and success.

But then comes the Weaver home.

Romero describes it with such grotesque specificity—rotting beams, termite damage, curtains turned "putrid yellow," piles of abandoned mail—that the house feels less like a setting than a corpse. Michael's reaction is immediate: "disgust and unease." The house becomes an early signal that Harper is not simply "nice suburbia." It's suburbia with rot underneath, suburbia where abandonment is contagious.

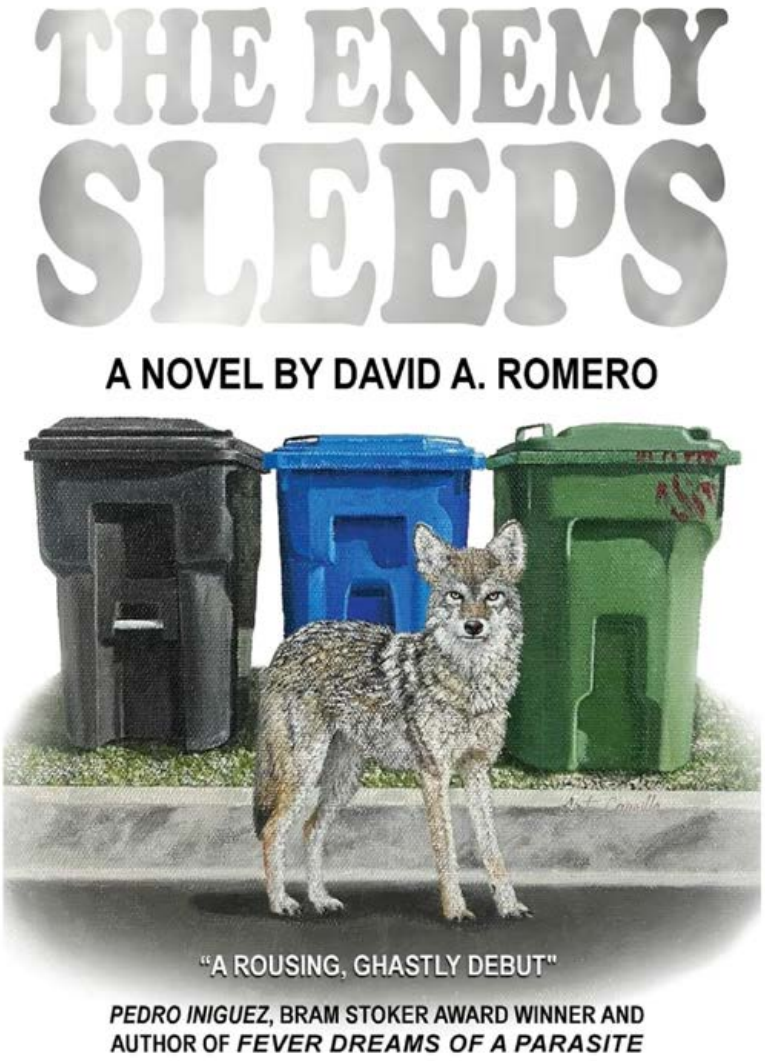
That rot is also social. Michael is introduced as a man who has "worked so hard, waited too long," and who believes he has earned his place. He is proud of the upward mobility Harper represents. Yet Romero subtly undermines him with the headline Michael misses: "Door-to-door solicitor goes missing." The novel is constantly doing this—letting the characters ignore warning signs while the reader watches dread accumulate in the margins.

Romero's social commentary is sharpest when it refuses easy binaries. The Martinez family are not idealized saints. They are people carrying their own prejudices and contradictions, shaped by capitalism's cruel logic of scarcity.

Michael, in particular, is a fascinating and infuriating figure. He is a Mexican-American man who has clawed his way into comfort, and he polices the boundaries of that comfort with the zeal of a convert. When Edward sees the Salvadoran gardeners across the street, he feels "a rush of elation," relieved to see other Latino people. But Michael's response is venomous:

"It's bad enough they're here… They have to bring their children too."

It's a devastating line,



because Romero doesn't make it unbelievable. He makes it depressingly familiar. Michael's casual hatred is the hatred of someone terrified of being dragged back down the ladder. In Romero's Harper, assimilation isn't peace—it's a desperate performance, and the price of belonging is often cruelty toward those with less power.

This makes *The Enemy Sleeps* feel politically intelligent. It isn't simply about racist white neighbors versus immigrant outsiders. It's about how fear and status infect everyone, how systems of class and race train people to see each other as threats.

Romero excels at turning place into a character. VistaView, the stalled housing development in Chapter 2, is a perfect example. It's described as both hope and scam, both dream and curse. The sign—"VistaView Coming Soon"—has been there for years, and locals joke that the development is cursed. Romero uses this half-finished suburbia as a symbol of American promise deferred—always almost affordable, always just out of reach.

The paragraph describing how residents might "sell their houses below, cashed in their kids' college funds… willingly plunged themselves into hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt" is bitterly funny and bleak. Romero understands that the American dream in 21st-century California often looks like self-destruction dressed as ambition.

Edward Martinez, entering James K. Polk High in Chapter 3, provides one of the novel's most human sequences. Romero captures the sensory overload of adolescence and displacement—the crush of bodies, the unfamiliar racial mix, the paralyzing feeling of not belonging. Edward becomes "like a rock in the middle of the river," and the metaphor is perfect: immobile, swallowed by motion.

This section is quietly poignant, and it grounds the book's later violence in something personal and real. Edward isn't simply a plot device; he's a kid trying to survive a new world.

Romero's use of Catholic imagery, especially in Chapter 11 ("The Dearly Departed"), introduces another layer of the novel: the ceremonial language people use to contain grief. The church scene is written with careful reverence—the organ note hanging in the air, the procession, the altar girl holding the crucifix. But Romero also includes a small moment of awkward humanity when Jane Wyate bumps the microphone and flushes red. That detail matters. It keeps the scene from becoming pure symbolism. It remains lived-in.

Religion in this book isn't salvation; it's structure. It's what people cling to when the neighborhood starts to unravel.

By the time we reach Chapter 26 ("*The Enemy Sleeps*"), the novel has shifted from simmering dread into full catastrophe. The scene of Shelly finding Neal injured is brutal and intimate. Romero piles on sensory detail: the blood, bruising, the knife wound, the broken door, the police tape.

Shelly's interior narration is especially powerful here:

"We're both fighters and survivors. Both Parsons."

This is where Romero's thematic engine becomes unmistakable. Survival is not always noble. Survival can mean inheriting brutality. It can mean becoming what hurt you. And the most frightening part is that Shelly's thoughts are maternal and loving—yet they exist inside the same Parsons family ecosystem that opened the novel with

a ritual killing.

The final beat of the excerpt is chilling: Neal, battered and bleeding, demands a gun.

"Where's the .30-30, Mom?" The question echoes the prologue's Winchester rifle. The novel folds in on itself like a noose.

The epilogue, "Leaving Harper," provides a grim sense of aftermath. Romero shows Harper scarred—broken fountain, police tape, footprints pressed into grass. Even the landscape bears witness. Neal is now known as "The Harper Murderer," suggesting that the violence has erupted into public narrative, gossip, and myth.

But Romero refuses a clean catharsis. Instead, he returns to the coyotes.

In the final excerpt, the residents of Valley Springs complain about the coyotes and insist:

"They don't belong here."

This is the most bitterly ironic line in the book, because the coyotes are the true natives. The people are the invaders. The developers are the invaders. The cul-de-sac is the invader. Romero ends by reminding us that the "enemy" is often the one who thinks they own the land, the story, and the right to decide who belongs.

Romero's prose is direct, visual, and heavy with detail. He often writes like a camera lingering on objects—roof shingles curling upward, dew on plastic, a knife folding shut. That style makes the novel immersive and helps Harper feel disturbingly real.

At times, the descriptive density can feel relentless, even obsessive, but it suits the material. *The Enemy Sleeps* is a book about surveillance, about watching and being watched, about reading the neighborhood for signs of threat. Romero's close attention becomes part of the psychological atmosphere.

The Enemy Sleeps is a tense, socially aware suburban horror-thriller that uses the architecture of tract housing, the politics of "affordable development," and the mythology of predators to expose something uglier than coyotes: the fear-driven violence of human belonging.

Romero's Harper is not merely a setting. It is a pressure cooker where class aspiration, racial anxiety, masculinity, and inherited brutality ferment until they explode. The novel's ultimate horror is not that violence occurs, but that it feels inevitable—because it is embedded in the way people talk, build, and dream.

In Romero's world, the enemy doesn't come from outside the neighborhood.

It sleeps inside it.

Richard Modiano is a native of Los Angeles. From 2010 to 2019, he served as executive director of Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Center in Venice, CA. During that period, he produced and curated hundreds of literary events. Richard is a rank-and-file member of the Industrial Workers of the World and the editor/publisher of the Moon & Sun Review. In 2019, he was elected vice president of the California State Poetry Society. [see AMASS issue 70 for a full-length interview.]



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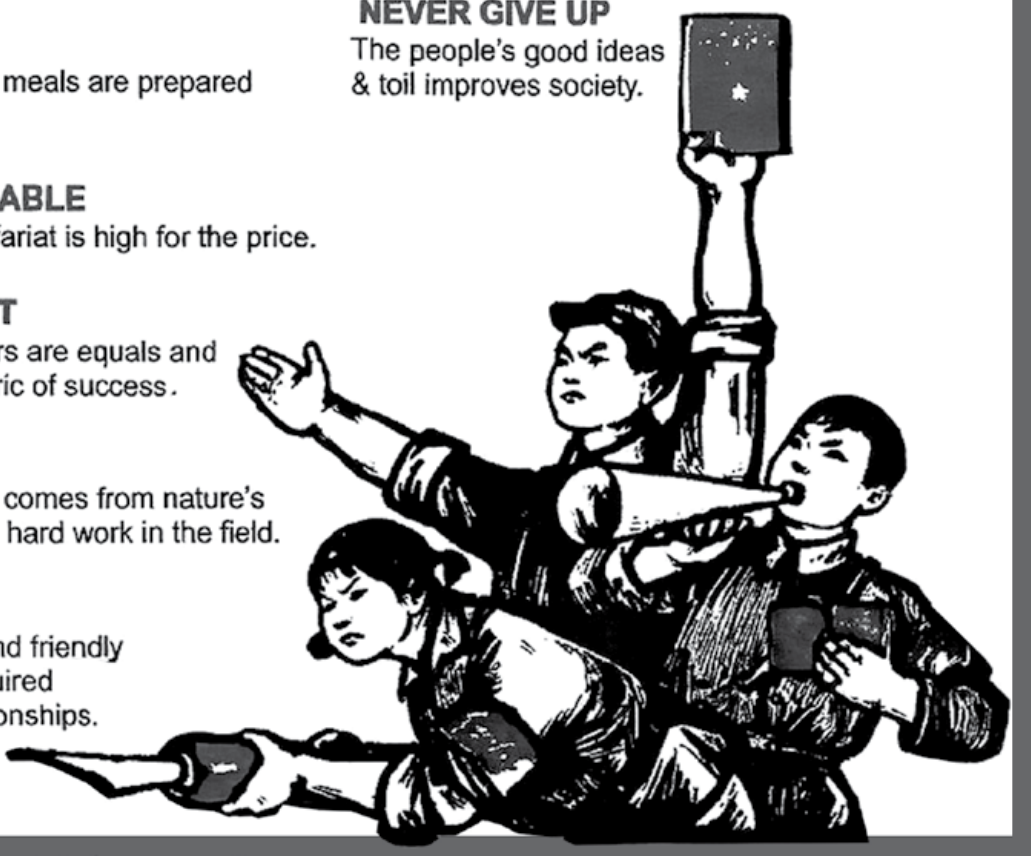
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CATCHING FIRE: THE LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES

Edited By S.A. Griffin and Richard Modiano (Rose Of Sharon Press/Three Rooms Press)

PUMA PERL

Sometimes a project comes together, born out of a need to commune with others, to share our grief, to DO something, anything and everything we can, in addition to donating money, little drops in the bucket, whatever we can afford.

I sat in my New York City apartment watching Los Angeles burn, as I'd watched New Orleans drown, as I'd watched Puerto Rico collapse. So many disasters. The closest to me was when Hurricane Sandy hit our area. I was unaffected except for loss of water and electricity, still able to climb thirteen flights of stairs and to do a little, a very little, to help. Donate clothes, food, water, and that little bit of money.

And write some articles for the Villager, when I still wrote for them, some poems, some songs. Does it help anyone but the individual artist? I don't know.

Growing up, I always thought the Bay Area was the cool place and started visiting and hanging out there in my late teens or early twenties. I never set foot in Los Angeles until many years later, after I had already started writing and performing. I bonded with the city, with the people, with the venues, with my NYC friends who relocated there, all of which resonated with me in ways San Francisco and Berkeley never did. I made cherished new friends and connections and had my most recent collection, *Birthdays Before and After*, published by Beyond Baroque Press, located in Venice. I was around for the first days of Punk Hostage Press and have participated in many of their events.

The only place outside of NYC and LA that has my heart is Puerto Rico.

In 2024, we watched in horror and grief as over one million acres of land burned, landmarks and homes destroyed. Heroic firefighters, those employed by the city or state, volunteers, underpaid hires of "private" fire companies without adequate equipment or insurance, fire fighters from other states, fire fighters crossing the border from Mexico to help.

As S.A. Griffin recounts in his introduction, Kat Georges, an Orange County native, and I spoke about the need to do something and Nicca Ray, an L.A. expatriate living in NYC, and I joined in and Kat called S.A. to check in and recount the conversations and, as S.A. writes, After I put down the phone, *the bells rang.*

S.A.'s "Beat brother," Richard Modiano, stepped in with an editorial assist and Kat and her husband, Peter Carlaftes, publishers/editors of Three Rooms Press stepped up to help bring it to fruition. I am very honored to have played a small part in the birth of this volume and to be included.

Catching Fire is filled with love, loss, grief, and hope. What else is there?

Sometimes a project comes together, born out of a need to commune with others, to share our grief, to DO something, anything and everything we can, in addition to donating money, little drops in the bucket, whatever we can afford.

– Puma Perl

Puma Perl is a poet, writer, performer, and the author of two chapbooks and three full-length poetry collections including *Birthdays Before and After* (Beyond Baroque Books). She's the front woman and primary lyricist for the Puma Perl Band, which brings spoken word together with rock and roll. She's received five awards from the New York Press Association in recognition of her journalism and was the recipient of the 2016 Acker Award in the category of writing. In 2024, with musician Joe Sztabnik, she released a record album, *Under Tenement Skies*, available on Bandcamp.com. You can read more on Substack, https://substack.com/@pumaperl.

"Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations.

– George Orwell

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THEATER

LONG JOHN SILVER TAKES TOPANGA

DAN MARCUS

My first encounter with the peg-legged, parrot-shouldered pirate took place at an earlier port of call, the Torrance Cultural Arts Center, where a children's theater version of *Treasure Island* was being rehearsed. I walked into one of the facility's community rooms and there he stood—Long John Silver in the person of actor Jeff Bergquist. True, he was wearing modern street clothes and both of his legs were intact, but there could be no doubt about his identity as he bellowed commands at a ship's crew of trembling young thespians.

Now, more than two decades later, Bergquist is appearing in a new production of *Treasure Island*, this time as a different character—the haunted pirate Billy Bones, whose mysterious appearance on the windswept coast of England gets the story rolling. Long John Silver will be played by award-winning actor Gerald C. Rivers. The setting could not be more perfect—Theatricum Botanicum, an open-air amphitheater nestled in Topanga Canyon with a stage spacious enough to accommodate a full-sized pirate ship and a rustic, eighteenth century inn.

First published in the late nineteenth century, *Treasure Island* in its day was regarded as the essential boys' book—a coming-of-age tale that contains all the elements—captains and cutthroats, mutiny at sea, and buried treasure. But one of its readers happened to be a young girl named Ellen, the daughter of the late actor and activist, Will Geer, best known in popular culture as Grandpa Walton on the long-running TV series about a close-knit family living on a mountain during the Great Depression.

Today, Ellen Geer is the artistic director of Theatricum and she's created a new adaptation of the adventure classic for the stage. Recently, between sessions in preparation for the show's opening, she was kind enough to answer my questions about the project.

Can you describe your discovery of *Treasure Island*?

We were on the road a lot when I was young. My goal was to read all the books in the library by the time I got to the East Coast and the West Coast and then back to the East Coast [laughs]. So I banged into Robert Louis Stevenson. I was enamored with the book immediately. "Precious" is the word I use for it.

[It's] a coming-of-age tale that contains all the elements—captains and cutthroats, mutiny at sea, and buried treasure.

– Dan Marcus

What would you like audiences to take away from your version of the story?

Well, people are going to get from it what they're going to get, but I'm really true to Stevenson. We Disney things in America. We make them not what they are. We Disney pirates. People love pirates and love to see them. But true piracy back when it was going on…it wasn't that nice [laughs]. Thieves, murderers.

Have you seen the film versions?

No, I'm an innocent on the film stuff. I'm all into literature. When I was kid growing up, we didn't go to movies that much. We were traveling and trying to keep our heads above water during a poverty time. So, that was not part of my life. It's the books; it's the stories.

Robert Louis Stevenson would be pleased. But are there any changes you can mention?

I've turned Ben Gunn into Jen Gunn.

Really?

Yes. There were many, many, many, many women pirates. Look it up. Oh, they're marvelous. It's just wild. I think it helps the balance of the piece.

Can you say something about the physical production?

We're going to build a theater boat—our man has already made a wonderful mast. And the barrels at the inn become the barrels on the boat. And the rope and the ladder. The whole stage left will be the boat from just before the second act on. We're working very hard on it. The actors will create that boat while singing a pirate song.

Will you be using yo-ho-ho?

No, no, not yo-yo-ho-ho. We have a wonderful man, Marc Pritchett, who's going to be working with me on collecting old pirate songs. I have three wonderful ensemble players. I think there'll be a mandolin and we'll have the accordion and I'll see if I can get somebody to learn how to play the harmonica. So, we can have moments of the kind of thing that kept the pirates going…besides rum, of course.

Treasure Island will run at Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga Canyon from June 20 through October 3. Details can be found at theatricum.com.

Dan Marcus is a literary editor, playwright, and curator of the Dan Marcus Gallery (YouTube). He's also written the music and lyrics for six stage musicals produced in the Philippines and Los Angeles.


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