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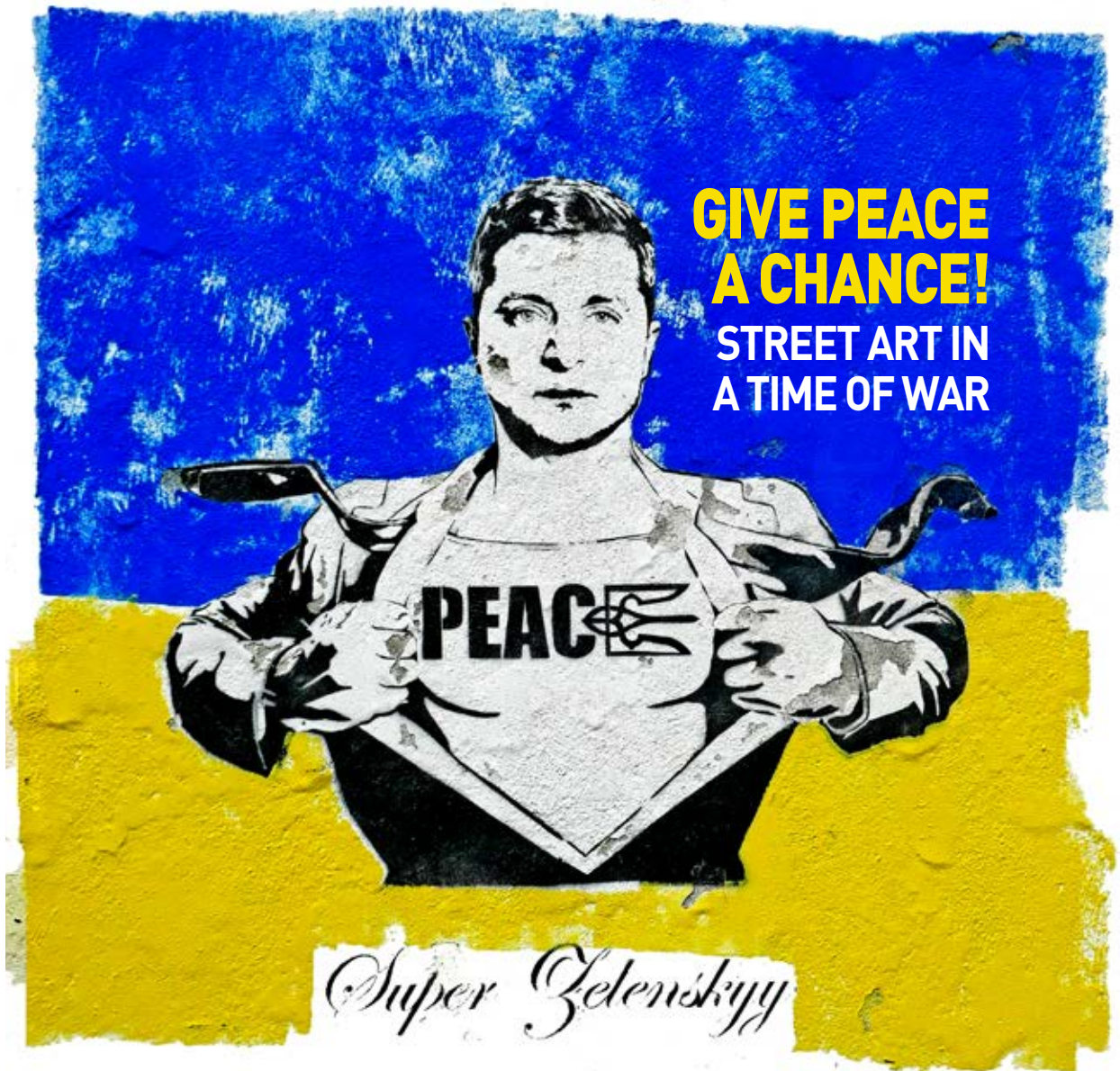
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Issue 241

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

January 2023



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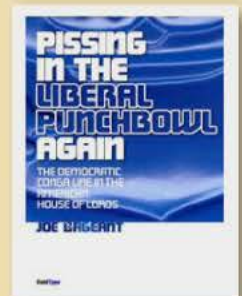
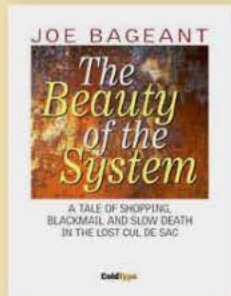
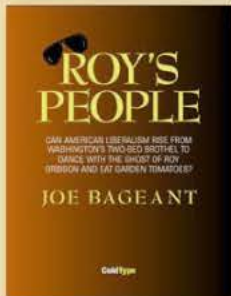
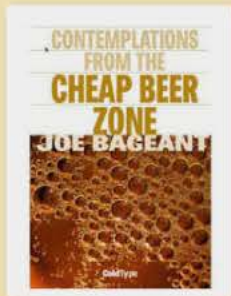
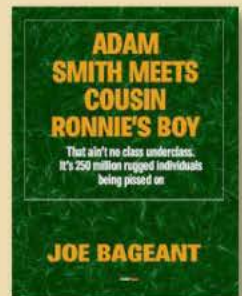
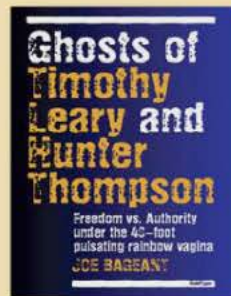
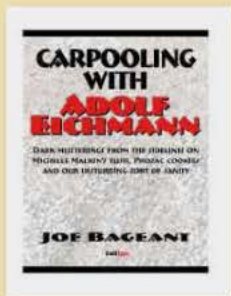
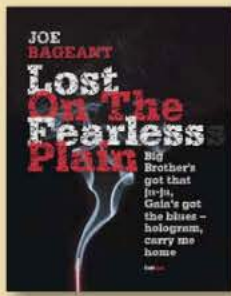
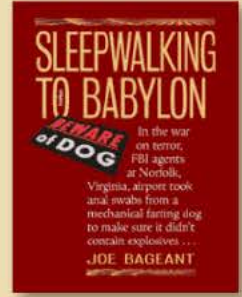
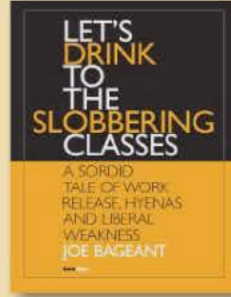
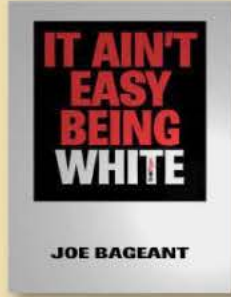
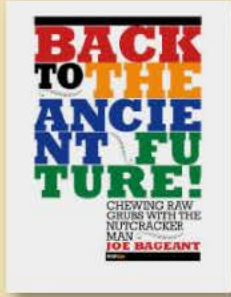
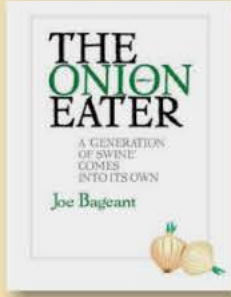
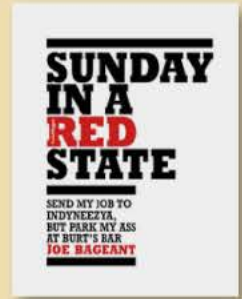
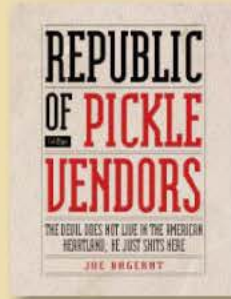
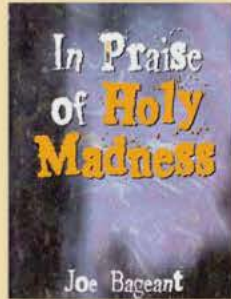
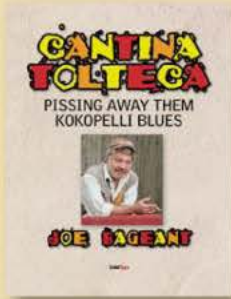
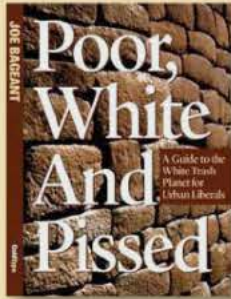
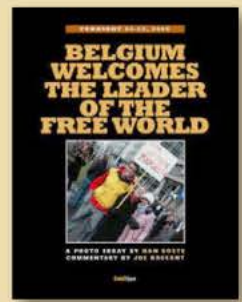
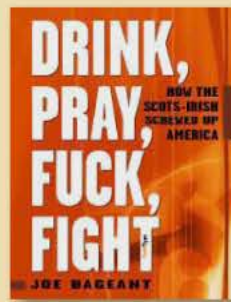
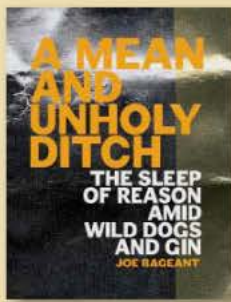
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NEWS | VIEWS | OPINIONS

INSIGHTS



One of the new Banksy images on the wall of a bombed-out Ukrainian home.

Banksy's latest work, in Ukraine, must be a great lift to Ukrainians. He makes fun of President Putin being flipped by a kid and pictures an old granddad in his bathtub. In pictures of two gymnasts painted on bombed buildings, he contrasts human capacity for beauty with human capacity for destruction.

When Banksy finishes his artistic sojourn through Ukraine, I hope he'll visit Washington and spray a few pictures on the walls of its white buildings, which would make a perfect canvas. Here are a few ideas:

- **For the wall of the State**

PHILIP KRASKE

A few more ideas for Banksy

Department, a work entitled *The Negotiators*. We see the pre-war negotiations between the United States and Russia. On one side of the table, we see Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, leaning forward on the table, a

very serious expression on his face, his hands outstretched with the palms upwards: a gesture that verges on supplication. On the other side of the table, we see Secretary of State Antony Blinken grinning at his cell phone and showing something on its screen to the fellow beside him, who is cracking up laughing.

- For the wall of **The Smithsonian National Museum of American History**, a work entitled *The Plotters*. Here we see an extraordinarily large work for Banksy, rising nearly two floors high. He seems to want people to take in some detail. It's a mural with a jagged line in between

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its two subjects, indicating, as comic books used to, a telephone connection between them. On one side is U. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, though she looks several years younger here. On the other is former US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, also a few years fitter and trimmer. Both are talking on cell phones. Nuland is sitting at her kitchen table with a fat plastic cup of a soft drink in her hand, straw sticking out, and we see a bit of the golden arches peeking from between her fingers. The lifeless wrappings of a Big Mac lay on the table before her, and beside that a pile of her famous homemade cookies. She is speaking at this moment, Pyatt listening, and we definitely see the letter F puckered on her lower lip. Pyatt is in an office chair in his study, legs crossed and propped on his desk, and he holds a martini – yes, with olive – daintily by the glass’s stem, the very image of the elegant diplomat.

● **For the wall of the Pentagon**, a work entitled *You idiot!* Here we see a three-star general talking on his desk phone, body launched over his desk, mouth jagged with rage. In the background, we see sections of the four Nord-Stream pipelines. Two have one hole each, from which methane is bubbling out. A third has two holes, and the fourth is intact. We can understand his dismay.

● **For the wall of the White House Briefing Room**, a work entitled *Dictator, Dictatee*. We see two reporters, a man and a woman, in three-quarters profile. On one side of the picture we see the stage and the lower few inches

of the White House press officer’s lectern. The reporters are very intent on taking down quotes from the speaker; their fingers blur over the keyboards of their laptops. They are both in their early thirties, wonderfully good-looking, but what strikes us is how alike they are; they could be twins. The fellow’s hair parted on the side, and the woman’s hair falls lushly over her shoulders and curls together below her chin. Both wear watches, the man’s a little fatter than the woman’s. The man wears a tie, the woman’s lapels are open, and both wear white shirts with tall collars and suit jackets of a dark colour. And now we notice in the background, looking along the

rows of reporters, that they are all repetitions, mere echoes, of those two reporters. That old rascal Banksy sure knows how to make a statement.

● Lastly, for the **wall of the White House**, a work entitled *Greatness*. Here we see President Kennedy giving his inaugural address, Vice President Johnson seated and squinting behind him. This painting has a caption, rare for Banksy: “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.” **CT**

Phillip Kraske’s latest book, *A Legacy of Chains*, is published by enCompass Editions. His website is www.philipkraske.com.

BINOY KAMPMARK

Tuvalu, climate change and the metaverse

When lost to climatic disaster and environmental turbulence, where does a whole nation go? History speaks about movements of people, whether induced by human agency or environment, finding sanctuary and refuge on other terrains, or perishing altogether.

In the case of the Pacific Island state of Tuvalu, the response is seemingly digital or, as its officials prefer to call it, creating the Digital Nation. This

particular entity, according to its government, will operate in the increasingly fashionable idea of the metaverse, a 3D virtual space marked by avatars of ourselves roaming through immersive experiences.

This does not sound particularly useful for flesh and blood refugees fleeing the flood, but this is partly the point, moving beyond the finite issues of territory and statehood. And it has given Tuvalu a moral pretext to scold wealthy countries lax about climate change.

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In the emphatic words of Tuvalu Minister of Justice, Communication and Foreign Affairs Simon Kofe, “As our land appears, we have no choice but to become the world’s first digital nation. Our land, our ocean, our culture are the most precious assets of our people. And to keep them safe from harm, no matter what happens in the physical world, we’ll move them to the cloud”.



Tuvalo: Fighting for its – and our – future..

The minister’s address was delivered from the digital twin of the Te Afualiku islet. And he has dramatic form, having delivered an address to attendees of COP26 standing knee-deep in the sea.

Tuvalu is by no means the first out of the blocks on this one. The Caribbean Island nation of Barbados and the South Korean capital, Seoul, have both ambitions to provide consular and administrative services from the metaverse.

In November 2021, the Barbadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade signed an agreement with Decentraland, with a view of finalising agreements with other Metaverse platforms such as Somnium Space and Superworld. The range of contemplated are various: how digital land will be purposed to house the relevant virtual embassies and consulates;

how e-visas will be granted; and the construction of teleporters enabling users to move their avatars through the metaverse. The appeal of the program to the ministry was one of numerical reach with minimal logistical problems: why stop at the 18 embassies and consulates now when you could have a base in 190 or so countries?

This year, the Seoul Metropolitan Government, after its November 2021 announcement about moving some of its functions into the metaverse, released a beta version of its “virtual municipal world” touted as Metaverse Seoul. As *Cities Today* reports, the city “aims to have a metaverse environment for all administrative services, including economy, culture, and tourism” in place by 2026.

Addressing the legal context of a submerged state will raise novel problems. The issue is very

much at the forefront of Kofe’s mind. What is one to do with maritime boundaries and the resources located within the relevant waters, notwithstanding inundation? And that’s just the start of it.

This issue has already preoccupied a number of legal authorities and bodies. In November 2012, the International Law Association (ILA) established the Committee on International Law and Sea Level Rise to study the possible impacts of rising sea levels and its

“implications under international law of the partial and complete inundation of state territory, or depopulation thereof, in particularly of small island and low-lying states”. The second part to the Committee’s mandate is to develop proposals to develop international law regarding such losses of territory, the impact on maritime zones “including the impacts on statehood, nationality and human rights”.

The implications of such losses are clear enough. Should the loss of a state to inundation and submergence also result in a loss of citizenship? The risk of statelessness is genuine enough, and it remains a source of much debate whether treaty law or international customary law is capable of addressing the issue. As legal scholar Marija Dobrić concludes in a 2019 study, “it

INSIGHTS

is unclear whether the people affected may be considered ‘stateless people’ within the meaning of the Conventions on Statelessness and, even if they did, how far that would serve to protect their rights effectively”.

Transferring the actual, tangible world to the metaverse with all its official and legal implications will induce a number of headaches. This near mystical transition to the ether of the virtual world sounds remarkable and, on some level, dangerously misguided. It relocates one set of challenges for another.

Issues of privacy (yes, where did that go?), moderating what content goes into such a model, and how people are to conduct themselves, are pressing points that are simply not being addressed seriously.

Works such as Matthew Ball’s *The Metaverse: And How It Will Revolutionize Everything*, do

little to clear this up, focusing on something approximating to religious dogma.

As one reviewer accurately puts it, the work not only minimises the importance of ethical, political and legal issues but also fails to address “how to construct the metaverse responsibly”.

The problems of the metaverse, insofar as they are being articulated, are in their infancy. But we have seen that architects of that scheme, including such manipulative luminaries as Mark Zuckerberg, suggest that a degree of healthy suspicion is required. The response from Tuvalu’s politicians is, on some level, understandable: they made me do it. **CT**

Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com.

As of May 2022, Imperial Tobacco Canada was listed as a Presidents’ Circle Member on the University of Toronto website, to acknowledge their “vital financial support at the leadership level”. Despite Big Tobacco’s efforts to renormalise itself, we should all be very wary of engaging with the self-described “Bold, Fast, Empowered” corporate culture.

British American Tobacco and other big tobacco companies have known about the clear links between smoking and a host of diseases, including cancer, since at least the 1950s. Despite this, they did not disclose their internal damning evidence. Instead, they aggressively undermined mounting scientific evidence of the public health risks associated with their products through a sophisticated array of deceitful strategies and tactics. These included funding dubious research, relying on allies that did not disclose their links to the industry, along with other forms of aggressive lobbying and marketing.

Fast forward 70 years, and tobacco remains the leading cause of cancer worldwide today. Epidemiologist Prabhat Jha estimates that one death results from each million cigarettes sold.

In the first half of 2022 alone, British American Tobacco sold 303.4 billion cigarettes globally. Cigarettes kill between one half and two-thirds of their users and approximately eight million people worldwide annually. Big Tobacco is still alive and well, despite the colossal efforts of tobacco control leaders worldwide. This is partly

BENOIT GOMIS & JILLIAN KOHLER

Big Tobacco’s dangerous new image

In September 2020, Imperial Tobacco Canada, the Canadian subsidiary of British American Tobacco, was awarded the “Great Place to Work” certification, one of the leading authorities on workplace culture.

Since then, Imperial Tobacco Canada representatives have met

with graduate students across the country, including at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, York University’s Schulich School of Business and McGill University’s Desautels Faculty of Management, urging students to “come join us as we build a better tomorrow”.

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the result of its renormalisation strategy.

Big Tobacco companies hit the proverbial rock bottom in the 1990s and early 2000s when facing several major lawsuits centred on the massive morbidity and mortality of cigarettes, the industry's extensive efforts to conceal and manipulate evidence, and its complicity in smuggling its own products around the world.

Another significant blow to the industry was the adoption of the landmark World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in 2005, dedicated to reducing tobacco demand and supply. Yet 20 years on, Big Tobacco companies continue to increase their revenue and profit.

Facing a potential decline post-WHO FCTC, British American Tobacco, Philip Morris International and other Big Tobacco companies sought to rebrand themselves from corporate pariahs to socially responsible companies keen on partnering with governments, as well as international organizations, NGOs, and universities. British American Tobacco now claims to “behave ethically in all we do”.

This rebranding has involved agreements with customs and law enforcement agencies on how to address the illicit trade in tobacco products, despite significant and growing evidence the industry is still complicit in it. Big Tobacco's anti-illicit trade efforts have focused on undermining policy, disrupting competitors and selling more of its own products – not tackling illicit trade per se.

In Canada, Big Tobacco has

used the spectre of illicit trade to argue against taxation, plain packaging, menthol bans and other effective public health measures, including through third parties (e.g. the National Coalition Against Contraband Tobacco) and direct lobbying of government officials and parliamentarians.

Another central part of the tobacco industry's rebranding focuses on a “smoke-free future” through “risk-reduced products”,



Pixabay.com

notably vaping. However, there are real health risks associated with vaping, such as exposure to chemicals and increased risk of lung and heart disease. Vaping has a particular attraction among young people, putting them more at risk for these diseases.

The tobacco industry has a long track record of blatantly lying about the harms caused by their products. They have repeatedly marketed filtered cigarettes, flavoured cigarettes and other products as tobacco alternatives that present reduced risks to consumers – despite evidence later showing this was false.

If anything, vaping products have created a rift within the

public health community – an all too familiar “divide and conquer” strategy of the tobacco industry. Vaping may also serve as a distraction from the continued commercial focus of the industry on deadly cigarettes, which continues to account for 84 percent of British American Tobacco's revenue worldwide.

Given the “fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry's interests and public health policy interests,” the WHO has repeatedly warned state parties to the WHO FCTC – including Canada – against tobacco industry engagement. Yet Canadian government officials routinely meet with tobacco industry representatives.

Experts in Canada consider “renormalisation” of tobacco as one of the great risks to progress in tobacco control. We can't let ourselves be fooled by the tobacco industry or become indifferent in the face of their attempts to rehabilitate their image.

Instead, we need to demonstrate leadership and make a commitment to hold the tobacco industry to account, and educate the next generation on the Big Tobacco playbook. This means not forgetting that, through the smoke screen, the tobacco industry's goal remains advancing corporate profit at the expense of public health. **CT**

Benoît Gomis is Sessional Lecturer, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto. **Jillian Kohler** is Professor, Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Toronto. This article first appeared at www.theconversation.com.

INSIGHTS

SAM PIZZIGATI

Talking about inequality includes the rich

Some conflicts we can see – and understand – rather easily. Their raw rhetoric will typically help us identify the opposing players and what they’re fighting over.

But sometimes the rhetoric never gets raw. The dominant players smother real differences with appeals to vague values. They paper over real conflicts and choices and leave the general public unaware and uninvolved.

Exhibit A in this sort of smothering? The international dialogue over “sustainable development”.

Over the past decade, nations worldwide have been gathering at a series of global confabs to hammer out what we all ought to be doing to save our planet and bring all peoples living on it up to a decent standard of living. These huddles, back in 2015, appeared to have scored an unprecedented breakthrough.

That September, our global heads of state gathered at the UN in New York and announced they had “adopted a historic decision on a comprehensive, far-reaching, and people-centred set” of goals and targets that would, among other noble outcomes, “build peace-

ful, just, and inclusive societies” and ensure our Earth’s “lasting protection”.

“We envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all”, the assembled dignitaries declared. “A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources – from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas – are sustainable”.

“We commit ourselves”, they added, “to working tirelessly for the full implementation of this Agenda by 2030”.

We’ve now come about halfway through the years those

leaders figured that “full implementation” would take. But that glorious global end state they originally promised, researchers at the Geneva-based UN Research Institute for Social Development noted earlier this fall, now seems frighteningly distant.

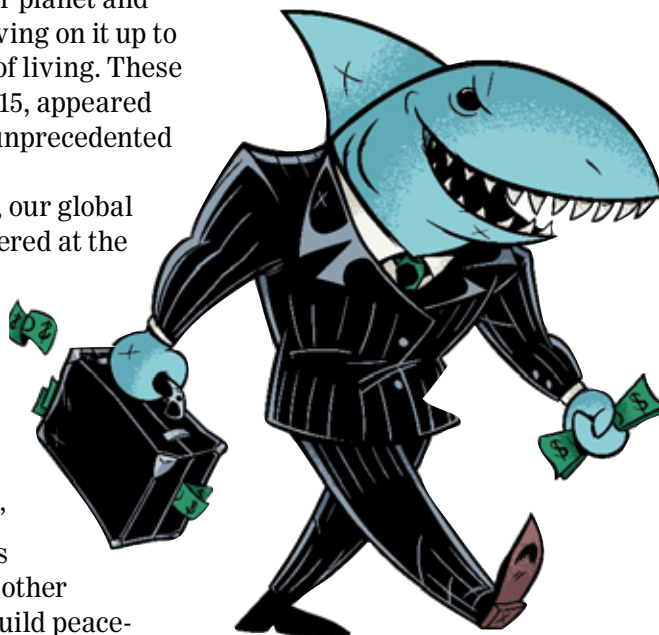
“With only eight years remaining to make this ambition a reality”, the UNISD observes in a powerful new report that has so far received far too little global attention, “the context for achieving the vision of Agenda 2030 has never been more daunting”.

Direct and difficult challenges to the goals world leaders so triumphantly announced in 2015 now seem everywhere. The rise of austerity. The backlash against egalitarian and human rights discourses and movements. The worsening climate crisis “threatening our very existence”.

We have, the UN researchers conclude, “a world in a state of fracture, and at its heart is inequality”.

The spirited new report from these researchers, *Crises of Inequality: Shifting Power for a New Eco-Social Contract*, frames our globe’s continuing maldistribution of income and wealth as the most formidable obstacle the world now faces to a safe and decent future.

“Our current system perpetuates a trickle-up of wealth to the top, leaving no possibilities for shared prosperity”, advises UN Research Institute director Paul Ladd. “It destroys our environment and climate through overconsumption and pollution and offloads the steep costs onto those



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who consume little and pollute the least”.

UN Secretary General António Guterres has of late been sounding similar themes.

“Divides are growing deeper. Inequalities are growing wider. Challenges are spreading farther”, Guterres told the UN General Assembly this past September. “We have a duty to act. And yet we are gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction”.

Both this bluntness from Guterres and the UN Research Institute’s new report reflect somewhat of a desperate desire for the sort of debate the world’s rich and powerful – and the nations they call home – so desperately want to avoid.

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, a former UN human development official and currently a professor of international affairs at The New School in New York, has been tracking the internal international community debates that have ended up papering over the dangers of concentrated income and wealth. She sums up her research in a revealing analysis that appears in the new *Crises of Inequality* report.

The current “Sustainable Development Goal” discourse on “inequality”, Fukuda-Parr points out, fixates almost exclusively “on those who are excluded, marginalised, and living below the poverty line”. This same discourse gives “little attention” to those at “the top of the distribution: the rich and powerful”.

Why speak of “inequality” but essentially address only poverty? The international negotiators who delivered up the new Sustainable Development Goals knew their

work had to somehow address the inequity of our global income and wealth distribution. Their predecessors who had produced the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, Fukuda-Parr notes, had come under heavy fire for their “glaring failure to include inequality”.

But how to include inequality became the central question. Would the new Sustainable Development Goals directly address the impact and extent of all the wealth and income that has settled into super-rich pockets? Or would the goals only focus on the “exclusion” of vulnerable and marginalised poor people from economic “opportunity”.

The first approach threatened the privileged status of the world’s wealthiest. The second ignored it. The second won out – by setting targets for the Sustainable

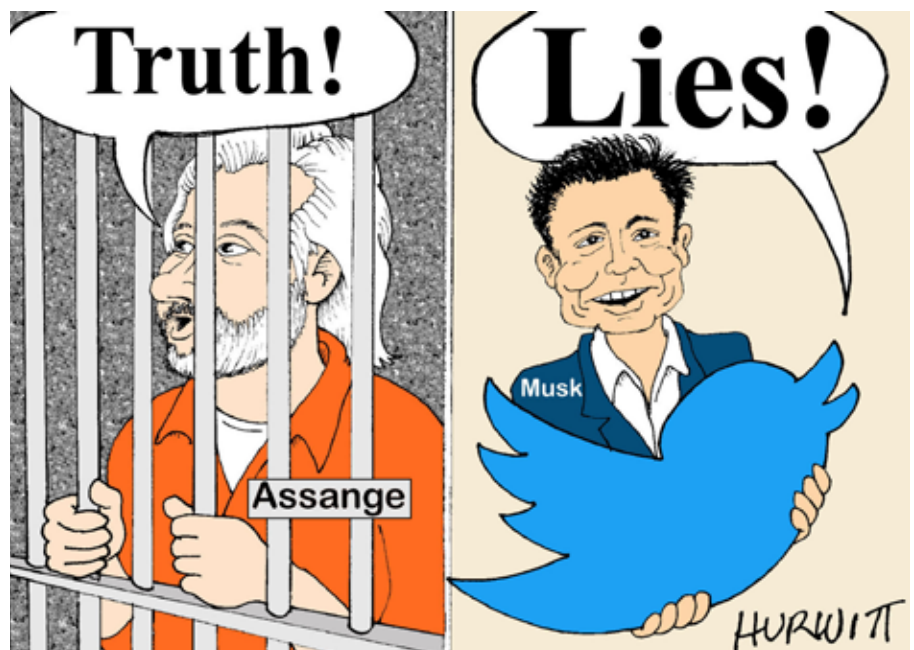
Development Goals, Fukuda-Parr explains, that “do not take into account the distribution of wealth within and between countries or make reference to extreme inequality”.

Fukuda-Parr goes into helpful detail on the behind-the-scenes struggle that generated this outcome. Global economic justice groups and some national delegations to the global negotiations wanted the goals to include statistical yardsticks that could tell us whether income and wealth distributions are becoming more or less concentrated. One such yardstick, the Palma ratio, lets societies compare over time the incomes going to a nation’s richest 10 percent and poorest 40 percent.

But the dominant national players in these negotiations

Hurwitt’s Eye

Mark Hurwitt



INSIGHTS

rejected any indicator that might show the rich gaining at the expense of everyone else. Their preferred approach: tracking whether or not the incomes of the poor were increasing faster than the national average. Societies where the incomes of the poor were rising faster than that national average, the argument went, were moving smartly to “shared prosperity”.

This narrow perspective on inequality would end up dominating the negotiations. The problem? By conflating “inequality” and “poverty”, as Fukuda-Parr helps us understand, those negotiators most defensive about their home nation’s extreme concentrations of income and wealth had come up with a global framework that “excludes from the narrative the problems of extreme inequality and the power of the wealthy”.

And that exclusion comes with a heavy cost. Ever-heavier concentrations of income and wealth,

researchers have shown over recent years, erode social cohesion and democracy, invite monopoly power, and even dampen the economic growth that cheerleaders for grand fortune claim we gain when wealth concentrates.

The poor don’t gain, in short, when societies ignore the rich. The rich just amass more of the clout and power they need to keep getting richer off the poor – and everyone else.

The new UN Research Institute for Social Development report recognises that reality. Let’s hope this research gains much more global attention. But let’s not just hope. Let’s do whatever we can to help that gain along. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati’s latest books include *The Case for a Maximum Wage* and *The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*.

Consortium News, has been debating these issues for a few years now, but the *Times* just seems to have noticed. Why? Because corporate journalists are now the victims.

The story begins: “Elon Musk’s decision to abruptly suspend several journalists from Twitter sparked an outcry on Friday from First Amendment advocates, threats of sanctions from European regulators, and questions about the social media platform’s future as a gathering place for news and ideas.

“But as people debated complex, novel issues of free speech and online censorship, the move also underscored the role of a simpler, more enduring element of American life: the press baron”.

These are not “novel” issues. They have been ongoing. Where have the outcries from First Amendment advocates been?

Comparing Musk to William Randolph Hearst and Rupert Murdoch, the *Times* said, “Twitter, albeit a different beast from newspapers and TV networks, enticed journalists by promoting itself as a virtual town square. Now Mr. Musk, despite his stated wish ‘that even my worst critics remain on Twitter’, is flexing his ownership muscle in seemingly arbitrary ways, appearing to stamp out accounts that personally displease him. sion tweeted that Musk’s move violated the EU’s Digital Services and Media Freedom Acts, which the *Times* said “serves as a kind of rule book for moderating online content”. The official tweeted: “There are red lines. And sanctions, soon.”

One wonders why suspending

JOE LAURIA

Media discover Twitter censorship

The *New York Times* reported on Dec 16 that European regulators are considering sanctions against Twitter because it suspended the accounts of three establishment journalists. [The next day Musk tweeted that he was lifting the ban after the results of a poll he ran] [Early

the next day, Musk tweeted that he was lifting the ban after the results of a poll he ran.]

The subtitle in the *Times* story said: “Elon Musk’s moves this week set off a heated debate about complex issues of free speech and online censorship”.

Set off? Independent media, like

INSIGHTS

independent journalists doesn't cross the same red lines.

The journalists from the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN and other outlets were banned when Twitter owner Elon Musk said they had endangered his and his family's safety by reporting on Twitter's suspension of a site (and apparently linking to that site) that published the geolocation of his private plane.

Musk mocked the reaction of the mainstream media, for suddenly discovering free speech on Twitter, especially after it did not protest Twitter suspending the

New York Post's account after the Hunter Biden laptop story days before the 2016 election.

Welcome mainstream media to the club. For journalists independent of the corporate media, being banned by Twitter or other platforms is nothing new.

Two of CN's regular contributors – Scott Ritter and Patrick Lawrence – have been permanently banned and remain banned even after Musk's takeover. CN board member, Garland Nixon, was permanently suspended under Musk's Twitter, but then restored. He has also been tempo-

rarily suspended by Facebook.

(For the record, no journalist, either establishment or independent, should be suspended as a rule from social media unless they do recklessly endanger lives.)

Consortium News's PayPal account was permanently suspended and NewsGuard has given CN its scarlet mark. So we know what we are up against, which establishment media just got a small taste of. **CT**

Joe Lauria is the editor of *Consortium News* – www.consortiumnews.com.



WILLIAM J. ASTORE

Peace is *not* our profession

The madness of nuclear warfare
is alive and well in America

Hey, cheer up because it truly is a beauty! I'm talking about this country's latest "stealth bomber", the B-21 Raider, just revealed by Northrop Grumman, the company that makes it, in all its glory. With its striking bat-winged shape and its ability to deliver a very big bang (as in nuclear weapons), it's our very own "bomber of the future". As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin put it at its explosive debut, it will "fortify America's ability to deter aggression, today and into the future". Now, that truly makes me proud to be an American.

And while you're at it, on this MAD (as in mutually assured destruction) world of ours, let that scene, that peculiar form of madness, involving the potential end of everything on Planet Earth, sink in. As a retired Air Force officer, it reminded me all too vividly of my former service and brought to mind the old motto of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), "Peace Is Our Profession." Headed in its proudest years by the notorious General Curtis LeMay, it promised "peace" via the threat of the total nuclear annihilation of America's enemies.

SAC long controlled two "legs" of this country's nuclear triad:

its land-based bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs. During the Cold War, those Titans, Minutemen, and MX "Peacekeepers" were kept on constant alert, ready to pulverise much of the planet at a moment's notice. It didn't matter that this country was likely to be pulverised, too, in any war with the Soviet Union. What mattered was remaining atop the nuclear pile. A concomitant benefit was keeping conventional wars from spinning out of control by threatening the nuclear option or, as was said at the time, "going nuclear". (In the age of Biden, it's "Armageddon".)

Luckily, since the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the world hasn't gone nuclear again and yet this country's military continues, with the help of weapons makers like Northrop Grumman, to hustle down that very path to Armageddon. Once upon a time, the absurdity of all this was captured by Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, the satirical 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*, which featured a "war room" in which there was no fighting, even as its occupants oversaw a nuclear doomsday. Sadly enough, that movie still seems eerily relevant nearly 60 years later in a world lacking the Soviet Union, where the



threat of nuclear war nonetheless looms ever larger. What gives?

The short answer is that America's leaders, like their counterparts in Russia and China, seem to have a collective death wish, a shared willingness to embrace the most violent and catastrophic weapons in the name of peace.

There's nothing magical about the nuclear triad. It's not the Holy "Trinity", as a congressman from Florida said long ago. Even so, it's worshipped by the US military in its own all-too-expensive fashion. America's triad consists of bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons (B-52s, B-1s, B-2s, and someday B-21s), those land-based ICBMs, and that most survivable "leg," the US Navy's Trident-missile-firing submarines. No other country has



The B-21 Raider was unveiled during a ceremony in Palmdale, California, on December 2, 2022.

a triad quite as impressive (if that's the word for it), nor is any other country planning to spend up to \$2-trillion over the next three decades "modernising" it. The Air Force, of course, controls the first two legs of that triad and isn't about to give them up just because they're redundant to America's "defense" (given those submarines), while constituting a threat to life on this planet.

Recently, when the Air Force unveiled that B-21 Raider, its latest nuclear-capable bomber, we learned that it looks much like its predecessor, the B-2 Spirit, with its bat-like shape (known as a "flying wing" design) driven by stealth or the avoidance of radar detection. The Air Force plans to buy "at least" 100 of those planes at a projected cost of roughly \$750-million each. Count on one thing, though: with the in-

evitable delays and cost overruns associated with any high-tech military project these days, the flyaway cost will likely exceed \$1-billion per plane, or at least \$100-billion of your taxpayer dollars (and possibly even \$200-billion).

Four years ago, when I first wrote about the B-21, its estimated cost was \$550-million per plane, but you know the story, right? The F-35 was supposed to be a low-cost, multi-role fighter jet. A generation later, by the Air Force's own admission, it's now a staggeringly expensive "Ferrari" of a plane, sexy in appearance but laden with flaws. Naturally, the B-21 is advertised as a multi-role bomber that can carry "conventional" or non-nuclear munitions as well as thermo-nuclear ones, but its main reason for being is its alleged ability to put nuclear bombs on target,

even without Slim Pickens ("Major Kong" in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*) riding down on one of them.

The main arguments for expensive nuclear bombers are that they can be launched as a show of resolve but also, unlike missiles, recalled, if necessary. (Or so we hope anyway.) They have a "man in the loop" for greater targeting flexibility and so complicate the enemy's defensive planning. Such arguments may have made some sense in the 1950s and early 1960s, before ICBMs and their sub-launched equivalents were fully mature technologies, but they're stuff and nonsense today. If nuclear-capable nations like Russia and China aren't already deterred by the hundreds of missiles with thousands of highly accurate nuclear warheads in America's possession, they're not about to be

deterred by a few dozen, or even 100, new B-21 stealth bombers, no matter the recent Hollywood-style hype about them.

Yet logic couldn't matter less here. What matters is that the Air Force has had nuclear-capable bombers since those first modified B-29s that dropped Little Boy and Fat Man on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the generals are simply not about to give them up – ever. Meanwhile, building any sophisticated weapons system like the B-21 is sure to employ tens of thousands of workers. (There are already 400 parts suppliers for the B-21 scattered across 40 states to ensure the undying love of the most congressional representatives imaginable.) It's also a boondoggle for America's many merchants of death, especially the lead contractor, Northrop Grumman.

A reader at my *Bracing Views* Substack, a Vietnam veteran, nailed it when he described his own reaction to the B-21's unveiling: "What struck me in my heart (fortunately, I have a great pacemaker) was the self-assured, almost condescending demeanour of the Secretary [of Defense], the Hollywood staging and lighting, and the complete absence of consideration of what cognitive/emotional/moral injuries might be inflicted on the viewer, never mind experiencing exposure to the actual bomber and its payload – add in the incredible cost and use of taxpayer money for a machine and support system that can never actually be used, or if used, would produce incalculable destruction of people and planet; again, never mind how all that could have been used to start making America into a functioning social democracy instead of a declining, tottering empire".

Social democracy? Perish the

It brings to mind an old saying (slightly updated): a hundred billion here, a hundred billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money

thought. The US economy is propped up by a militarised Keynesianism tightly embraced by Congress and whatever administration is in the White House. So, no matter how unnecessary those bombers may be, no matter how their costs spiral ever upwards, they're likely to endure. Look for them flying over a sports stadium near you, perhaps in 2030 – if, that is, we're still alive as a species.

As the Air Force buys new stealth bombers with your tax dollars, they also plan to purchase a new generation of ICBMs, or a "ground-based strategic deterrent" in Newspeak, to plant in missile silos in garden spots like rural Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. The Air Force has had ICBMs since the 1960s. Roughly 1,000 of them (though that service initially requested 10,000) were kept on high alert well into the 1980s. Today's ICBM force is smaller, but ever more expensive to maintain due to its age. It's also redundant, thanks to the Navy's more elusive and survivable nuclear deterrent. But, again, logic doesn't matter here. Whether needed or not, the Air Force wants those new land-based missiles just like those stealth bombers and Congress is all too willing to fund them in your name.

Just as the purchase price for the B-21 project is expected to start at \$100-billion (but will likely far exceed that), the new ICBMs, known as Sentinels, are also estimated to

cost \$100-billion. It brings to mind an old saying (slightly updated): a hundred billion here, a hundred billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money. In a case of egregious double-dipping, Northrop Grumman is once again the lead contractor, having recently opened a \$1.4-billion facility to design the new missile in Colorado Springs, conveniently close to the Air Force Academy and various other Air and Space Force facilities. Location, location, location!

Why such nuclear folly? The usual reasons, of course. Building genocidal missiles creates jobs. It's a boon and a half for the industrial part of the military-industrial-congressional complex. It's considered "healthy" for the communities where those missiles will be located, rural areas that would suffer economically if the Air Force bases there were instead dismantled or decommissioned. For that service, shiny new ICBMs are a budget bonanza, while helping to ensure that the real "enemy" – and yes, I have the US Navy in mind – won't end up with a monopoly on world-ending weaponry.

In the coming decades, expect those "Sentinels" to be planted in fields far from where most Americans live under the guiding principle that, if we keep them out of sight, they'll be out of mind as well. Yet I can't help but think that this country's military is out of its mind in "planting" them there when the only harvest can be of mass death.

As *MAD* magazine's Alfred E. Neuman would undoubtedly have said, "What, me worry?"

Oh, *MAD* old world that has such nukes in it! Colour me astonished, in fact, that America's nuclear weapons mix hasn't changed much since the 1960s. That sort of world-ending persistence should tell us

something, but what exactly? For one thing, that not enough of us can imagine a brave new world without genocidal nuclear weapons in it.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev actually did so. They came close, in fact, to reaching a deal to eliminate nuclear weapons. Sadly, Reagan proved reluctant to abandon his dream of a nuclear space shield, then popularly known as “Star Wars” or, more formally, as the Strategic Defense Initiative. Since Reagan, sadly enough, US presidents have stayed the course on nukes. Most disappointingly, the Nobel Prize-winning Barack Obama spoke of eliminating them, supported by former Cold War stalwarts like Henry Kissinger and George Schultz, only to abandon that goal, partly to solidify support in the Senate for a nuclear deal with Iran that, no less sadly, is itself pretty much dead and buried today.

If saintly Reagan and saintly Obama couldn’t do it, what hope do ordinary Americans have of ending our nuclear MADness? Well, to quote a real saint, Catholic peace activist Dorothy Day, “Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy, rotten system”. It’s hard to think of a system more filthy or rotten than one that threatens to destroy most life on our planet, so that this country could in some fashion “win” World War III.

**It seems that we may
be on the verge of
returning to a nightmarish
past, where we lived
in fear of a nuclear war
that would kill us all**

Win what, exactly? A burnt cinder of a planet?

Look, I’ve known airmen who’ve piloted nuclear bombers. I’ve known missileers responsible for warheads that could kill millions (if ever launched). My brother guarded ICBM silos when he was a security policeman in SAC. I sat in the Air Force’s missile-warning centre at Cheyenne Mountain under 2,000 feet of solid granite as we ran computerised war games that ended in... yep, mutually assured destruction. We were, at least individually, not insane. We were doing our duty, following orders, preparing for the worst, while (most of us, anyway) hoping for the best.

A word of advice: don’t look for those within this nightmarish system to change it, not when our elected representatives are part of the very military-industrial complex that sustains this MADness. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry, with real freedom, could act to do so

for the benefit of humanity. But will we ever do that?

“We’re going backwards as a country”, my wife reminds me – and I fear that she’s right. She summarised the hoopla at the B-21’s recent unveiling this way: “Let’s go gaga over a mass-murder machine”.

Collectively, it seems that we may be on the verge of returning to a nightmarish past, where we lived in fear of a nuclear war that would kill us all, the tall and the small, and especially the smallest among us, our children, who really are our future.

My fear: that we’ve already become comfortably numb to it and no longer can take on that culture of mass death. I say this with great sadness, as an American citizen and a human being.

No matter. At least a few of us will have profited from building new ultra-expensive stealth bombers and shiny new missiles, while ensuring that mushroom clouds remain somewhere in our collective future. Isn’t that what life is truly all about? **CT**

William J. Astore, a retired lieutenant colonel (USAF) and professor of history, is a senior fellow at the Eisenhower Media Network (EMN), an organization of critical veteran military and national security professionals. His personal blog is www.bracingviews.org

**READ THE BEST OF
EDWARD S. HERMAN**

www.coldtype.net/herman.html

DAVID MCCOOEY

The folk philosophy of Bob Dylan

Riffs, grifters, history
– and a terrific playlist

Bob Dylan, sing-songwriter and Nobel laureate, has spent a career confounding expectations. What, then, should one expect of his new book, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*? Firstly, “modern song” should read “American modern song”, since almost all of the 66 songs discussed by Dylan are American. And by “modern”, we are talking mid-century, mostly from the 1940s to the 1960s. Stylistically and generically, the songs cover the Great American Songbook, folk, rock’n’roll, country, and so on.

In other words, they are the kinds of Americana that can be found on Dylan’s own records. “Philosophy” is the kind of word that can mean anything in publishing contexts, and it should warn the reader not to expect anything so programmatic

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MODERN SONG

Bob Dylan
Simon & Schuster
\$??

FOLK MUSIC: A Bob Dylan Biography in Seven Songs

Greil Marcus
Yale University Press
\$??

as, for instance, a history of modern song.

Dylan’s choice of songs forms a mood more than a method. The book is populated by outlaws, grifters, cowboys, gangsters, con artists, and gamblers. There are also references to hucksters like Colonel Tom Parker (Elvis Presley’s manager) and the 19th-century showman PT Barnum. And to rubes (or those easily duped). So, reader, be aware: this book is concerned with “modern song” on its own terms.

Each song is a springboard for two different kinds of riffing. Firstly, there are eccentric fictions that relate tangentially, if at all, to the particular song (though many reconfigure lyrical elements of the song in question). Written in the second person, these pieces have all the allure of someone narrating

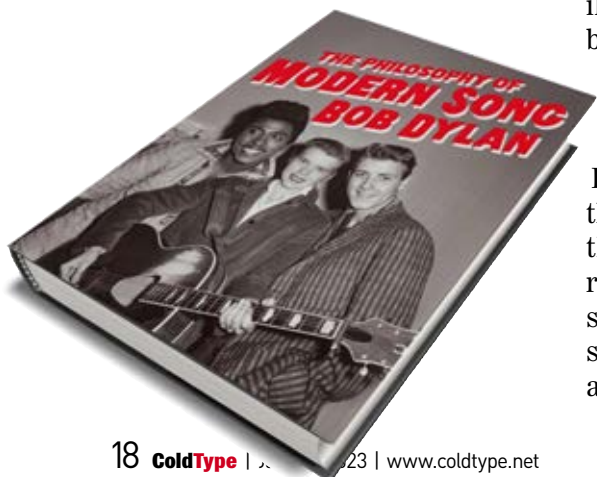
a dream, which is to say (for me), not much.

Full of Dylanesque imagery, these dream pieces lack the strangeness (and music, of course) of Dylan’s mid-60s period, but they have that period’s semi-prophetic loquaciousness, mixing the everyday with the apocalyptic.

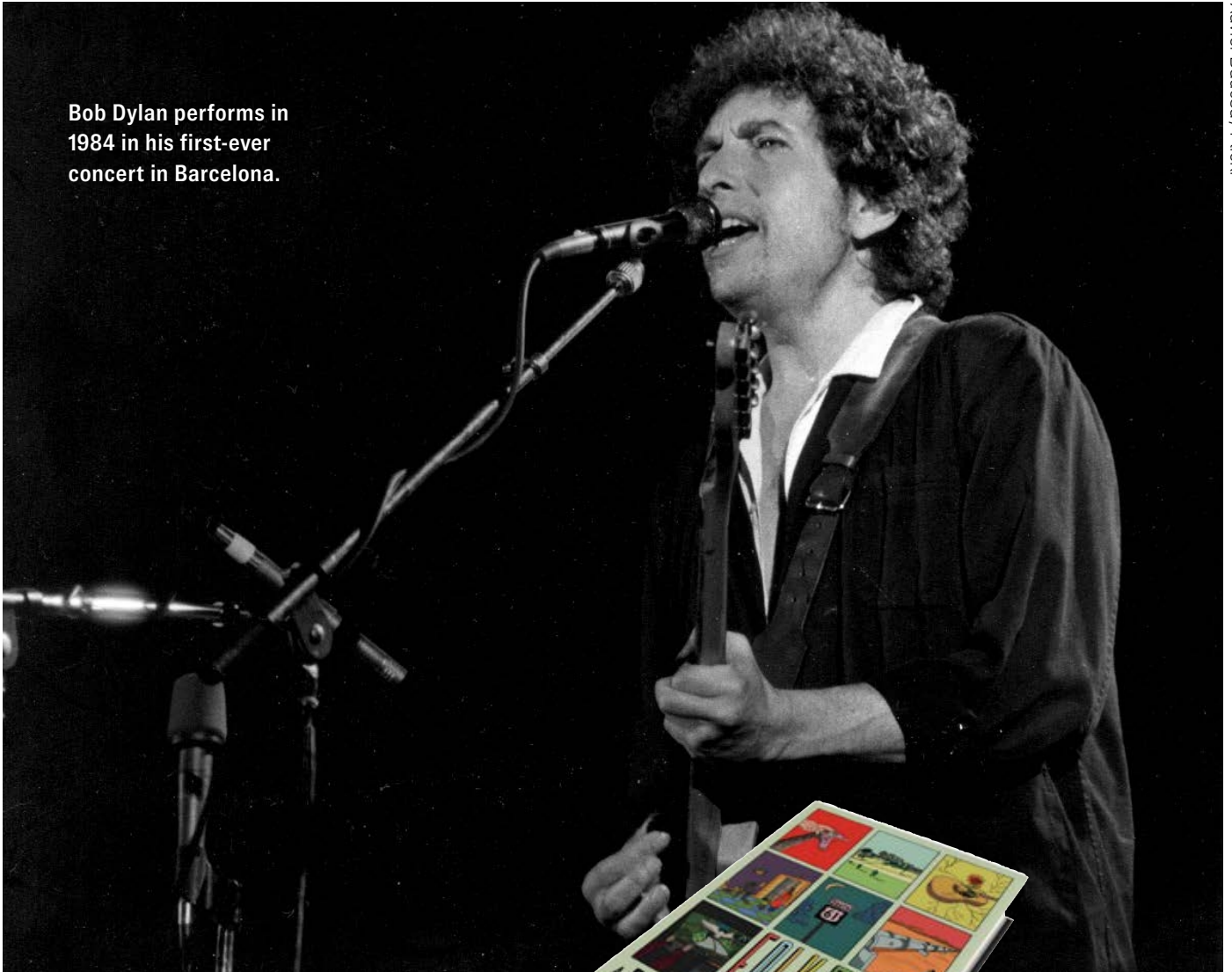
For instance, the chapter on *Everybody Cryin’ Mercy* by the jazz and blues artist Mose Allison has you thumbing a ride on the Ferris Wheel, shooting ducks and winning kewpie dolls, while all of mankind cries mercy – every race, creed, and colour – rich and poor from all quarters, all over creation.

There are some startling moments in these pieces, but cumulatively they have the air of AI-generated prose.

More interesting, are the essays that follow the dream pieces. Like those pieces, the essays are often tangentially related to the song in question. Sure, we learn a little about Townes Van Zandt (his family wanted him to be a lawyer) or the link between Rosemary Clooney, Armenian folk song, and Alvin and the Chipmunks, but these essays are mostly an occasion for Dylan to muse (philosophise) on everything from the movies, polygamy, and lemmings, to language, history,



Bob Dylan performs in 1984 in his first-ever concert in Barcelona.



and war. Or, as the dust jacket of the (very nicely designed and lavishly illustrated) book grandly puts it, “the human condition”.

Like the dream pieces, the essays are associative and riffing in nature, but they are more interested in imparting information.

The essay on Nina Simone’s *Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood* begins with an account of the problems that the first sentence of the novel *L’Étranger* (by fellow Nobel laureate, Albert Camus) has given translators, then moves onto a pot-

ted history of Esperanto, followed by some notable examples of misunderstanding, before briefly landing on Simone’s recording of the song, which in turn becomes an opportunity to talk about the relationship between art and interpretation. On this last subject, it is hardly surprising that the “mercurial” Dylan should assert that art can be appreciated or interpreted but there is seldom anything to understand.

Talking of Simone, she is only one of three female artists covered

here. Coupled with Dylan’s thoughts, presumably baiting, on polygamy and feminism, as well as the often-misogynistic representations of women in the dream pieces (climaxing on the Eagles’ *Witchy Women*), one can only wonder if Dylan doesn’t have a “woman problem”.

But, as always with Dylan, it is hard to know how seriously to take any of this. Is he riffing on the misogyny of his source material or just engaging in it himself? This question brings to mind the arguments surrounding much stand-up comedy (that other source of the

word “riff”).

But all of this makes *The Philosophy of Modern Song* sound more solemn than it is. The book is filled with genuine, and informed, enthusiasm for many of the songs discussed, such as the Fugs’ *CIA Man* and the Osborne Brothers’ *Ruby, Are You Mad?*, the latter of which leads to the unexpected, but not entirely ridiculous, assertion that bluegrass is “the other side of heavy metal”.

Dylan likes these sort of apothegms: “There are more songs about shoes than there are about hats, pants, and dresses combined”; “There is nothing scarier than someone earnest in their delusion”.

The best parts of the book are when you are in on the joke, or when Dylan is just flat-out funny. Anyone who knows anything about the Grateful Dead would have to laugh at the deadpan assertion that they are “essentially a dance band”. (But since Dylan’s recorded an album with them, perhaps he knows best.) Dylan also does a good satirical side-order in grumpy-old-man-isms. For instance, on food he writes that there isn’t an item on the menu that doesn’t have half a dozen adjectives in front of it, all chosen to hit you in your sociopolitical-humanitarian-snobby-foodie consumer spot. Enjoy your free-range, cumin-infused, cayenne-dusted heirloom reduction. Sometimes it’s just better to have a BLT and be done with it.

That observation was from the essay on *Your Cheatin’ Heart* by Hank Williams. There are lots of instances of gerunds (“-ing” words) missing their terminal g’s in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, and not just when it comes to song titles. Elvis (Presley, not Costello) is described as “backwoods-born but city-livin’, truck-drivin’, hip-shakin’ with a feral whiff of danger”. The fact that the complex

The best parts
of the book
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adjectives get their hyphens makes it clear that Dylan is havin’ fun with his gerunds.

And this book is mostly about fun (though things get serious when Dylan talks about the plight of Native Americans and war). When I ignored the high-falutin’ talk on the blurb and press release, I got a lot of fun (rather than philosophy) from this book.

If nothing else, notwithstanding the gender bias, the book makes up a terrific playlist. I can’t imagine any reader who wouldn’t discover some unknown gems. Two of my favourite discoveries were the book’s most recent songs (from 2001 and 1986): *Doesn’t Hurt Anymore* by John Trudell, and *Old Violin* by Johnny Paycheck, just two of the numerous Johns and Johnnies who populate this work.

Much of the milieu covered in *The Philosophy of Modern Song* converges with the American music that Greil Marcus wrote about in his groundbreaking book, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock’n’Roll Music* (1975).

Being a critic, Marcus is more disciplined than Dylan, but, like him, his technique is based on riffing, on finding unexpected connections amid arcane knowledge.

Marcus has written a number of books about Dylan, including a book on the Basement Tapes that

Dylan made with the Band, the second edition of which was called *The Old Weird America*. The America dealt with in Marcus’s latest book on Dylan, *Folk Music: A Bob Dylan Biography in Seven Songs*, might be less old, but it certainly remains weird.

Like *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, the title of Marcus’s latest book is a little inaccurate, since it is not really a biography of Dylan, except inasmuch as a biography of America is a biography of its national songwriter.

Just as Marcus did in *The History of Rock’n’Roll in Ten Songs* (2014), and Dylan does in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, the songs in *Folk Music* are launching pads for wide-ranging meditations – in this case about Dylan and American history and culture.

Indeed, Marcus generally seems more comfortable when talking about cultural matters rather than specifically musical ones. If there are any unifying themes to *Folk Music*, they are race and history. (It is emblematic that the frontispiece to the book is a 1963 photograph of the African American writer James Baldwin and Dylan.)

Given these themes, it is not surprising that four of the seven songs that make up *Folk Music* come from the 1960s. The 60s was not just the time Dylan became the spokesperson for the folk-music movement (and later his whole generation), but it was also the period when the American civil rights movement became notably active in the face of long-standing oppression and violence.

The two movements, of course, intersected in various ways, not least of all in the “protest song”, of which two of the most important – *Blowin’ in the Wind* (1962) and *The*

Times They Are A-Changin' (1964) – are discussed by Marcus. (The missing g's seem less quaint in this context.)

Marcus tends to a hyperbolic style, producing a slightly febrile mood, appropriate to the events being related. He also uncovers, or produces, hidden connections between apparently disparate things.

His chapter on *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* (1964) links that topical song (which gives a more-or-less factual account of a white man who killed a black woman and received a six-month jail sentence for assault) with Laurie Anderson's unlikely art-pop hit, *O Superman* (1981). These songs have nothing to do with each other, stylistically or in terms of lyrical content, but Marcus brings the two into the same orbit to show how songs can come loose from their authors ... how songs not only mark history, or even make it, but become part of its fabric.

This strange disconnection of song and history is shown in a particularly disturbing way in the chapter on *Desolation Row* (1965). One of Dylan's most celebrated songs, *Desolation Row* begins with an especially

Marcus is sanguine about the accusations of plagiarism that have dogged Dylan since almost the beginning of his career

arresting opening line: "They're selling postcards of the hanging".

Marcus recounts how when this song was released few people knew that in the first decades of the 20th-century, there had been a craze of postcards of lynchings of black Americans by crowds of white Americans ... postcards sent through the US mail, traded among collectors, sold in souvenir shops and at country fairs.

Marcus is not making the case that *Desolation Row* is about this appalling historical phenomenon, per se, but (in the shortest chapter in the book) he imagines how echoes of that phenomenon might have made their way to the young Dylan.

Marcus ends *Folk Music* with a chapter on *Murder Most Foul*, Dylan's 17-minute ballad on the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, from his most recent album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020). The

subject of this song not only returns the milieu to the crucible that was the '60s, but again thematises the strange and complex relationship between history and song. Attending to the way that songs can be in and of history is a way of thinking about that unstable category, the "folk song".

Marcus's *Folk Songs* doesn't just deal with Dylan's folk period; he shows – in a digressive, indirect way – the value of thinking about Dylan in terms of history, and the shared vernacular music of a nation. It is not surprising, then, that Marcus is so sanguine about the accusations of plagiarism that have dogged Dylan since almost the beginning of his career.

This is because Marcus sees Dylan, like the abstract figure of the folk singer, as constantly rewriting the national songbook, giving the old songs "new lives to live". This is, after all, what he is up to in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, which is as much a book of remixes as it is a work of music criticism. **CT**

David McCooley is Professor of Writing and Literature, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia. This article first appeared at www.theconversation.com.

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Subdude, Shoreditch



DUNCAN CUMMING

Give peace a chance!

London street artists respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine



Subdude, Shoreditch

Russia's war with Ukraine hit the streets of London in an explosion of graffiti on walls throughout the city during 2020. Much of that art – highlighted in the invaded country's blue and yellow insignia – mirrored mainstream media support for the 'heroic' Ukrainian opposition to Russia's 'unprovoked' invasion, but it was heartening to see equally-striking, displays of anti-war, pro-peace art, demanding an end to this – and all – wars.



Only, Shoreditch.



Sidok, Shoreditch



Unnamed artist, Camden Town



Only, Pedley Street, Brick Lane



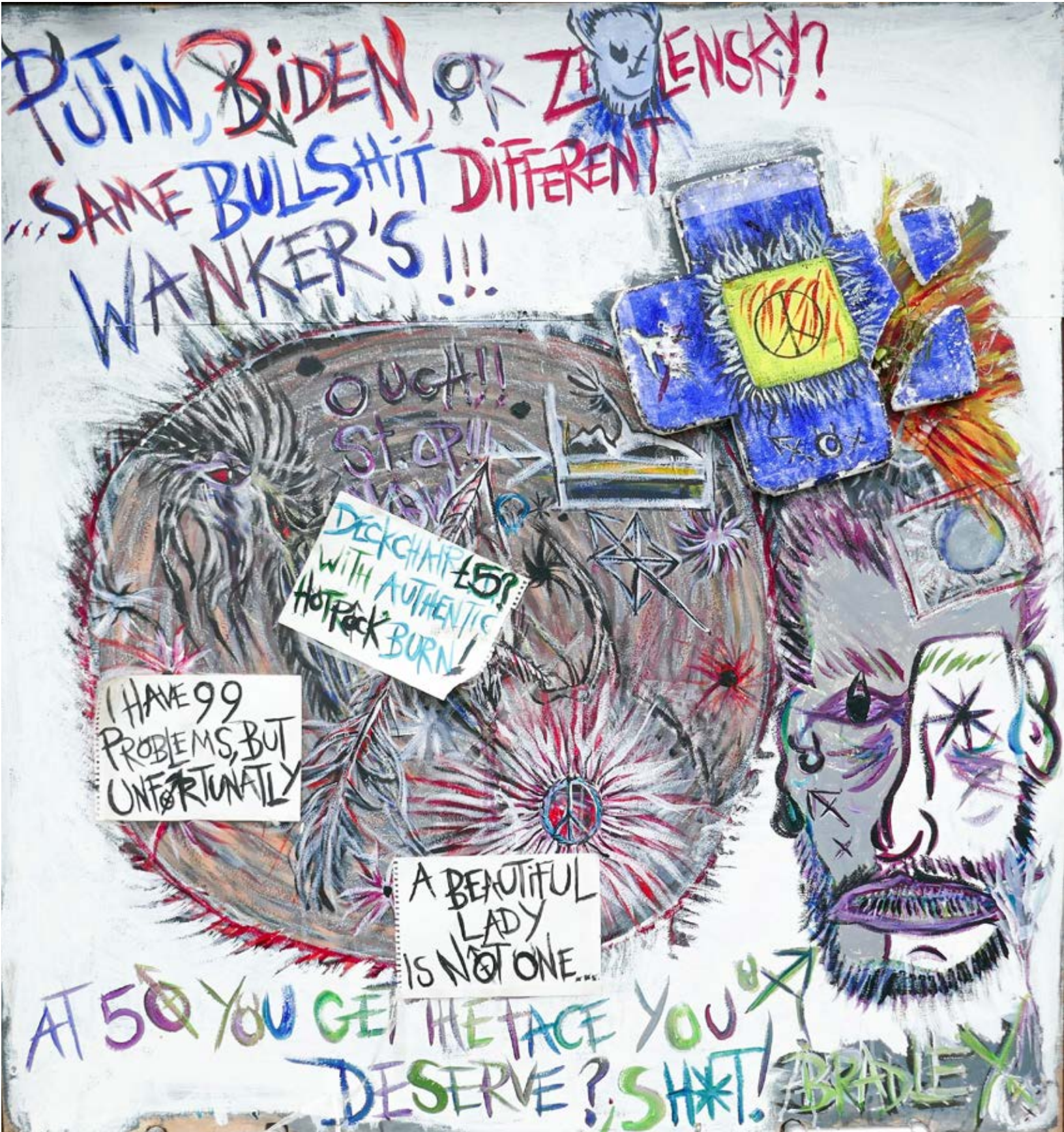
Nathan Bowen, Fleet Street



Unnamed artist, Shoreditch

Duncan Cumming is based in London, and has been photographing graffiti and street art since the 1990's. Find more of his photos at

www.flickr.com/duncan



Unnamed artist, Broadway Market



123RF.com

JOHN CLARKE

Austerity, abandonment and assisted dying

The right to ‘die with dignity’ is warped by austerity and social exclusion

The notion that someone facing a terminal illness or fatal condition should be able to decide at what point their life should be brought to a close and to opt for “death with dignity”, isn’t one that can be brushed aside. Many of us will find ourselves or someone we love in a situation where such a decision is anything but an abstract consideration.

Yet the reality is that no public policy can be considered outside of the broader social and political context. As austerity measures take ever greater effect and the provision of healthcare and vital support services are effectively rationed, the danger is that assisted dying can be effectively forced on those who have been socially abandoned. Moreover, when this intersects with deeply entrenched notions of a hierarchy in the value of life, the risks become even greater and a humane measure can be horribly warped into something dreadful.

In Canada, this dilemma is being posed in the very sharpest terms. In the spring of last year, the country’s system of medical assistance in dying (MAID) was expanded so as to become available to those “whose natural death is not reasonably foreseeable”. At the time, disability rights advocates argued that “due to racism and ableism, expanding MAID will simply lead to more people with disabilities ending their lives”.

As Sara Jama of the Disability Justice Network of Ontario put it, “It looks as though the government is rushing legislation to allow people the right to die without also supporting the right to live, and that’s where I get worried”. Plans now in effect to expand MAID to those with mental health diagnoses, add a new element of danger to those words.

In 2021, there was a 32.4 percent increase in those whose lives were ended by MAID and 2.2 percent of

these (219 individuals) were in the “natural death is not reasonably foreseeable” category. It can’t be credibly denied that this represents “far too much death among individuals who couldn’t live fulfilling lives because of a lack of support for dealing with their disability/disabilities”.

In November, it was reported that Amir Farsoud, who suffers from chronic pain, depression and anxiety as a result of an injury, and who lives in St. Catharines, Ontario, “is in the process of applying for medical assistance in dying (MAiD), not because he wants to die, but because social supports are failing him and he fears he may have no other choice”.

Farsoud is, clearly and indisputably, being driven to end his life because of what can only be described as social abandonment. He lives on sub-poverty social benefits and, with the home he shares with others now up for sale, he simply can’t find housing he can afford. “I don’t

want to die but I don't want to be homeless more than I don't want to die", he stated.

This case adds weight to a warning contained in a 2021 UN report that when "life-ending interventions are normalised for people who are not terminally ill or suffering at the end of their lives, such legislative provisions tend to rest on – or draw strength from – ableist assumptions about the inherent 'quality of life' or 'worth' of the life of a person with a disability".

Earlier in the year, the situation came to light of Denise, a 31-year-old woman in Toronto who uses a wheelchair and who was seeking MAID because she couldn't find affordable housing. As she put it starkly, "I've applied for MAiD essentially ... because of abject poverty." Denise had Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) and needed a home that was wheelchair accessible and that had cleaner air.

This lack of these basic supports led this young woman to declare that she was "relieved and elated" that her application for MAID was moving forward. She had even asked the doctors working with her to waive the normal 90 day waiting period for those whose natural death is imminent so that her life could be brought to a close even sooner.

Though there was ample evidence that the quality of Denise's life could be greatly improved simply by finding a home where the air was less likely to trigger her allergies, "none of the doctors (involved in her MAID application) contacted her to learn about the efforts to help Denise find housing first}.

David Lepofsky, a disability advocate, observed that "We've now gone on to basically solving the deficiencies in our social safety net through this horrific backdoor, not that anybody meant it that way,

This important story involving harm caused by powerful British interests was deemed unworthy even of mention

but that's what it's turned into". Hundreds of thousands of people in Canada suffer from sensitivities to chemicals and Dr. Riina Bray, medical director of the Environmental Health Clinic at Women's College Hospital in Toronto, suggests that "Society is failing these patients. My hope is that we can just put a stop to this very easy out that MAID is providing and start acknowledging that these people need to be helped".

In 2017, Statistics Canada found that "nearly a quarter of disabled people are living in poverty. That's roughly 1.5-million people, or a city about the population of Montreal". Clearly, the implications of a system of medically assisted death that reinforces an agenda of austerity and abandonment are dire. In the present context of a deepening cost of living crisis, this becomes utterly horrifying.

Healthcare systems in Canada are under severe pressure and had been deteriorating long before the dreadful impact of the pandemic compounded the problem massively. As waiting times for medical procedures grow and the capacity to provide timely emergency treatment is compromised, the threat of the misuse of assisted dying increases.

In 2020, an article appeared in the *British Medical Journal* enti-

tled "Are intensive care protocols harming the disabled?" In the context of surging Covid caseloads, it examined "exclusion criteria (that) dictate who will not be considered when providing access to advanced care and treatment" in various countries.

The article noted that "numerous US states, including Tennessee, exclude individuals with developmental disabilities and the life-limiting illnesses." It pointed to cases in the UK of "patients being designated Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) without consultation with the patient or their families." It also drew attention to "Drafted guidelines for the province of Ontario in Canada (that) also excluded specific disabilities and individuals who require assistance and accommodation".

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Catalina Devandas, suggests that: "Current developments in medical research and practice may revive eugenic ideas if safeguards for those affected are not ensured". It is hardly an alarmist overreaction to suggest that such 'safeguards' are lacking in the implementation of MAID in Canada.

The website of Dying With Dignity Canada declares that "It's your life. It's your choice" and there is much to agree with in that proposition. However, there is no freedom of choice for those who are driven to end their lives because of poverty and exclusion. Reactionary decisions about which lives are valuable and which are expendable simply rob the end of life decision making process of any validity. **CT**

John Clarke was an organiser with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) for nearly three decades. He blogs at www.johnclarkeblog.com.

DAVID CROMWELL

‘Nearly every war has been the result of media lies’

Julian Assange, state-corporate media and Ukraine

Julian Assange once observed that, “Nearly every war has been the result of media lies”. For daring to publish evidence of US war crimes, Assange now sits in the high-security Belmarsh prison in London, at risk of being extradited to the US within the next few weeks. The prospects for a fair trial range from miniscule to zero.

In a recent interview, WikiLeaks Editor-in-Chief Kristinn Hrafnsson told US journalist Glenn Greenwald that legal avenues in London to challenge Assange’s unlawful extradition were being exhausted. What is needed now is not recourse to a legal system that is subservient to power, but a political fight, as Hrafnsson explained:

“In my perception, and I’ve been sitting in on all the proceedings in London, all the extradition proceedings in London have exposed only one thing, and that’s the fact that this is just not going to be won in a court. There’s no justice to be had in court rooms in London. That’s obvious, and I don’t have to mention the United States, that’s one of the essences of the defence in fighting the extradition, that he will never be able to get a fair trial there. So,

we’re running out of time. We need to push this on a different level and so I decided that we needed to go on a tour to shore up political support, because the only way to fight a political persecution is through political means”.

The *Guardian* recently joined with the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *El País* and *Der Spiegel* in publishing an open letter calling on US President Joe Biden to end Assange’s prosecution. It has been ten years since Assange sought refuge in London’s Ecuadorian embassy. After being dragged from the embassy by police in April 2019, Assange has been locked up in the harsh regime of Belmarsh prison, suffering from failing physical and mental health. Indeed, according to then UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, Assange is literally a victim of torture. In 2020, the prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet*, published a letter from Doctors for Assange, with 216 signatories from 33 countries, drawing urgent attention to “the ongoing torture and medical neglect of Julian Assange”.

Political writer Thomas Scripps noted that the open letter from the

five newspapers: “makes clear that Assange has been the victim of a monstrous campaign of state persecution, costing him years of his life and good health, for revealing state criminality, designed to set a chilling example for others”.

But what took them so long to speak out? Scripps observed: “The conduct of these newspapers over the past decade has been thoroughly reprehensible. Their efforts to poison public opinion against Assange, to give credence to the false claims and accusations made against him, facilitated the American state’s persecution of this principled and courageous journalist”.

Australian journalist John Pilger, who has done so much to raise public awareness of Assange’s plight, was scathing: “The editors of the *Guardian*, *NY Times* etc. finally speak up for Julian #Assange – weasel words and 10 years late. Ten years after the *Guardian* made public WikiLeaks’ secret password and launched a campaign of vilification against a truth-teller”.

He added: “The *Guardian*, which



Protesters outside the High Court in London on January 24, 2022, after Julian Assange's defence team won the right to take his extradition case to the UK's Supreme Court.

has played a major role in the persecution of Julian #Assange, is now scurrying for cover with a call for him to be freed. But even its weasel statement repeats malign fiction about his failure to redact files”.

Pilger was referring to the oft-repeated smear that the WikiLeaks co-founder recklessly endangered the lives of informants when publishing information that exposed US war crimes. In fact, Assange was extremely careful in redacting names, and he was effectively thrown to the wolves by both the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*.

How do we know this? Award-

winning Australian journalist Mark Davis was an eyewitness to the preparation of the Afghan War Logs in 2010 for newspaper publication, documented in his film, *Inside Wikileaks*. Davis spoke at a public meeting in Sydney in 2019 and said that he was present alongside Assange in the *Guardian*'s “bunker” where a team from the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* worked on the publication of articles based on, as the NYT put it: “A six-year archive of classified military documents [that] offers an unvarnished, ground-level picture of the war in Afghanistan that is in

many respects more grim than the official portrayal”.

Davis attested that, far from being “cavalier” about releasing documents that might endanger lives, it was: “*Guardian* journalists [who] neglected and appeared to care little about redacting the documents”.

Moreover, they had a “graveyard humour” about people being harmed. No one, he stated emphatically, expressed concern about civilian casualties except Assange.

As Oscar Grenfell explained in a piece for the World Socialist Web Site: “David Leigh and Nick Davies,

senior *Guardian* journalists, who worked closely with Assange in the publication of the logs, have repeatedly claimed that Assange was indifferent to the consequences of the publication”.

These *Guardian* claims were pivotal in corporate media smears against Assange. They were also crucial in US government claims that publication “aided the enemy”.

However, noted Grenfell: “In reality, the US and Australian militaries have been compelled to admit that release of the Afghan war logs did not result in a single individual coming to physical harm”.

As Scripps pointed out, the open letter is evidence that the five newspapers, including the *Guardian* and *NYT*, were well aware from the start that Assange “was functioning as a journalist, innocent of any crime”.

Why speak out now in defence of Assange, ten years too late? The likely concern is that a US show trial would expose the newspapers’ own nefarious role in providing cover for US war crimes, as well as in enabling the persecution of Assange.

There is also another vital element in the timing. As Scripps wrote: “This exposure of US war crimes would come at a time when the United States is expanding its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, sold to the public on the grounds that US intervention is necessary to prevent Russian atrocities”.

It is vital for state and corporate power that public trust in the news media – a key conduit for carrying and amplifying Western propaganda – does not collapse entirely. In the US, trust in the news has fallen to an historic low. The percentage of Americans who say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in newspapers has fallen to

The number of Americans who say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in newspapers has fallen to 16 percent

16 percent. For television news, it is even lower at 11 percent.

In response to these findings, Glenn Greenwald was blunt: “The public despises the corporate media. There is almost nobody held in lower esteem or who is more distrusted and abhorred than the liberal employees of large media corporations. Nobody wants to hear from them, so in-group arrogance is all they have left”.

Here in the UK, in the past year alone, the public has seen reshuffling and defenestration of Tory Prime Ministers, governments and ministers in a kind of bizarre soap opera. This has been reported as serious political drama by mass media outlets, most especially BBC News, that permit no serious scrutiny of state-corporate power; no substantive challenge to the special interests that rule the country for themselves, while the population suffers and the climate emergency worsens.

As we noted in a media alert earlier this year, the rise of oligarchical politics has seen a great merger of politics and the media that dominates how the UK is run. Yet another example of this phenomenon was highlighted recently by Aaron Bastani of *Novara Media*: “Richard Sharp, BBC chairman, was Rishi Sunak’s boss at Goldman Sachs, donated £400k to the Conservatives, & was once an adviser

to Boris Johnson.

“My generation & those younger need to be realistic. Big parts of British public life aren’t democratic. And it’s getting worse”.

In a recent interview with Mark Curtis of *Declassified UK*, John Pilger exposed the insidious, power-serving nature of the British media. He took particular aim at the BBC: “I’ve always found it amusing, bemusing, that so many people in the BBC see themselves as having entered into a Nirvana of objectivity, as if their objectivity and impartiality have been given to them intravenously”.

He continued: “Andrew Marr was very good at waxing on lyrically about this. Andrew Marr, the political editor of the BBC, who made a victory speech virtually on behalf of Tony Blair outside Number 10 Downing Street in 2003. [...] Tony Blair, he said, tonight as the troops have gone into Iraq, he has been ‘proved conclusively right.’ Conclusively right! And Andrew Marr was absolutely eloquent in talking about the BBC as a national treasure of objectivity. Of course, Orwell called it ‘doubletalk’.”

Long-time readers will be aware that we have highlighted Marr’s valedictory words from Downing Street, a shameful performance that ought to have ended his career: “I don’t think anybody after this is going to be able to say of Tony Blair that he’s somebody who is driven by the drift of public opinion, or focus groups, or opinion polls. He took all of those on. He said that they would be able to take Baghdad without a bloodbath, and that in the end the Iraqis would be celebrating. And on both of those points he has been proved conclusively right. And it would be entirely ungracious, even for his critics, not to acknowledge that tonight he stands as a larger

man and a stronger prime minister as a result”. (BBC *News At Ten*, 9 April, 2003)

Pilger also pointed to the ongoing “tsunami of propaganda” about Ukraine which is “something I’ve never seen before”, including even the lies told about Iraq in the run-up to the 2003 invasion. When it comes to “opposing views or informed views” on Ukraine, “none of them have been allowed in” by the media, he said.

As for the *Guardian* and its coverage of foreign affairs: “We have some people now who are an absolute disgrace, especially on the reporting of Ukraine [and] Russia”.

The *Independent* carried a rare dose of sanity when it permitted a piece by Mary Dejevsky, formerly the newspaper’s foreign correspondent in Moscow. Dejevsky observed that the informed view that “Western provocations” had played a major role in precipitating the Ukraine war is virtually absent from news coverage. Specific factors that are routinely ignored by the BBC and the other major news media include: “post-Cold War triumphalism, the green light for former East bloc states to join Nato despite what Russia understood to have been promises to the contrary, the 2014 ousting of Ukraine’s democratically elected president – which Russia saw as a US-inspired coup – and the ways the West subsequently drew Ukraine into the Western bloc, with the EU association agreement and Nato military assistance, even as it abrogated Cold War arms control treaties one after one, or allowed them to lapse”.

Consideration of such facts matter, she noted, “because without understanding why Russia invaded, there can be no understanding of what will be needed for a lasting peace”.

Media-promoted war fever, whose main beneficiary is the Western military- intelligence-industrial complex, must end

Robin Andersen, who teaches media studies at Fordham University in the US, also pointed to the dangers of not permitting a proper understanding of how we got here; not least because it involves heavily nuclear-armed states: “Without context and accuracy, reasoned discourse and the ability to find solutions or engage in diplomacy are beyond our reach as we approach nuclear Armageddon. Corporate newsframes regularly exclude alternative voices of peace and those who call for an end to war, leaving out an entire discourse that has animated global discussions about conflict resolution for decades”.

Jeffrey Sachs, an economist and foreign policy analyst, recently told Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!*: “I think both sides see that there is no military way out. I’m speaking of NATO and Ukraine on one side and Russia on the other side. This war, like von Clausewitz told us two centuries ago, is politics by other means, or with other means, meaning that there are political issues at stake here, and those are what need to be negotiated”.

Sachs continued: “Much of this war has been about NATO enlargement, from the beginning. And, in fact, since NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia were put on the table by President George W. Bush Jr. and then carried forward

by the US neocons basically for the next 14 years, this issue has been central, and it’s been raised as central. But President Biden, at the end of 2021, refused to negotiate over the NATO issue”.

He pointed out that the urgent need for the war not to escalate, perhaps towards nuclear Armageddon, demands that the issue of NATO expansion be negotiated immediately, adding: “There are other issues, as well, but the point is, this war needs to end because it’s a disaster for everybody, a threat to the whole world. According to European Union President Ursula von der Leyen, 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers have died, 20,000 civilians. And the war continues. And so, this is an utter disaster, and we have not searched for the political solution”.

To return to Julian Assange, the need for independent media that serve the public and scrutinise power has thus never been greater. The pattern of the media calling for one war after another, as media analyst Alan MacLeod highlighted in a recent tweet, is persistent and abhorrent:

“Bombing Iraq Isn’t Enough”

“Bomb North Korea, Before It’s too Late”

“Bomb Syria, Even If It Is Illegal”

“To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran”

On and on it goes. This media-promoted war fever, whose primary beneficiary is the Western military-intelligence-industrial complex, must end; for the sake of humanity.

Assange put it succinctly: “If we have a good media environment, then we will also have a peaceful environment”.

CT

David Cromwell is co-editor of *medialens*, the UK media watchdog. This article was first published at www.medialens.org.

JOE ALLEN

Relentless transformation

How primitive digital pixels evolved into biodigital brains. We are in the throes of a digital transition



123Rf.com

A few weeks ago, gamers across the world celebrated the 50th anniversary of Pong. On November 29, 1972, Atari plugged a few trodes into the global brain with their classic quarter-sucking arcade game. To its makers' surprise, people loved playing simulated table tennis with two featureless paddles and a square ball bouncing back and forth.

Pong was primitive, for sure, but hypnotic nonetheless. Quite literally, it was a beta test for two-way digital mind control.

The player controls a virtual world onscreen with his mind, while in turn, the pixels control the contents of his consciousness. Offering little more than a coin-slot and a scoreboard – not unlike a brothel, really – Pong managed to capture the soul of a generation, evolving game-by-game into the sophisticated mental technium that has ensnared the modern world.

You can think of Pong as a seed technology, planted fifty years ago in the fertile bed of a bygone America, where rabbit-eared TV sets flickered in every home. Over the years, thousands of subsequent video

games – produced by hundreds of new companies – grew into clanging arcades, increasingly advanced home consoles, a \$200-billion gaming industry, and a billion young men whose virility is expended on virtual adventures that amount to little more than GAME OVER.

Sprouting up amid kids gathered in soda shops, the original format produced ever more bizarre branches. The gameplay evolved into a quadriplegic man playing Pong using an implanted brain-computer interface, a monkey trained to play Pong with a Neuralink trode, and most recently, a brain organoid that can slap Pong balls in its Petri dish. The latter project, known as DishBrain, saw scientists at Cortical Labs blend human brain cells with counterparts derived from mouse embryos. After coaxing this goo to become chimeric brain blobs, they grew the resulting organoids on an electrode array, hooked that up to a game of Pong, and sure enough, DishBrain could hit the ball like a pro. “This new capacity to teach cell cultures to perform a task in which they exhibit sentience, by controlling the paddle to return the ball via sensing”, one lab director exclaimed, “opens up new discovery possibilities which will have far reaching consequences



for technology, health, and society”.

What comes next? We can only imagine. But I bet it involves hard-wired human-monkey hybrids playing with themselves while immersed in violent VR banana porn. If not, we now have a decent metaphor for teenagers glued to their screens.



Every kudzu infestation begins with a few seed pods. This a good way to imagine all the new technologies hitting us at once right now.

It's as if our planet is being bombarded with meteors, each one loaded with extraterrestrial seeds that rapidly evolve into new creatures upon impact. As they multiply

and mutate, these inventions crawl across the Interwebs and slide into various corporate boardrooms and government labs, where they develop into more advanced tech organisms before invading the wider culture.

Genetic engineering, for example, started with isolated experi-

ments the year after Pong made its debut. Today, GMO foods are so commonplace, most Americans are unfazed by the idea of munching on an augmented tomato. Some salivate at the thought of lab-grown meat, approved by the FDA last year.

With the discovery of the CRIS-

PR molecule in 2011, coupled with dramatic advances in artificial intelligence tools, direct gene-editing is poised to change the direction of human evolution. The technology is readily available, and any jerk can buy a bacteria-grade home CRISPR kit for a few hundred bucks.

Gene-based treatments were once reserved for desperate medical conditions. Today, in the wake of the Great Germ Panic of 2020, most Americans have had at least one dose of mRNA jabbed into them, with a good portion begging for more.

I'm no gypsy fortune-teller, but as I gaze into my crystal ball, I foresee commercial gene-therapies, designer babies, and the genetic equivalents of filler-puckered duck lips just over the horizon. There will be benefits, no doubt, but the costs will be enormous. And I don't mean money.

The same pattern is evident in brain-machine interfaces, advanced robotics, and artificial intelligence. These extraterrestrial seeds are hitting all over the world, then rapidly evolving and diversifying into new biological, mechanical, and cognitive tools. As futurists have pointed out, it's as if alien lifeforms are growing alongside the ancient plant and animal kingdoms – a digital Life 3.0. It's important to remember, though, that these technologies won't change the whole world all at once. Each one starts as a seed and grows gradually. Beginning with IBM's Simon in 1993, the smartphone took over a decade to become ubiquitous, and that adoption rate is exceptional. Televisions (aka, one-way mind control devices) and automobiles (aka, cyborg exoskeletons) are two other notable examples.

Tech history is littered with failed inventions, like "spray-on hair" or Betamax videotapes

You won't walk out your door tomorrow and see cybotrons hovering past wearing jetpacks and AR goggles, with intelligent drone swarms trailing behind. The reality is more like those annoying EV rental scooters, or those mosquito-like drones buzzing overhead.

Oftentimes, it's hard to tell which seeds will grow and which will fall by the wayside. Tech history is littered with failed inventions, like "spray-on hair" or Betamax videotapes. On the other hand, a handful of innovations, after sufficient improvement, will change everything – whether you like it or not.

Most major transformations are synchronous with previous, more stable arrangements. That means new technologies tend to coexist beside older forms. As the sci-fi novelist William Gibson once quipped, "The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed".

Pong blew up in the '70's, but actual table tennis didn't go away. Not entirely. At present, many people still ride bicycles, tend gardens, and watch TV, even though they also drive to the grocery store while reflexively swiping their smartphone screens. It's obvious that legacy humans are being shoved aside by the app-addicted Borg, but species displacement rarely happens all at once.

That said, the transformation is relentless. Bizarre mutations are accumulating by the day. Culturally and biologically, we are becoming

transhuman.

The day after Pong's fiftieth anniversary, Neuralink held a "Show and Tell" to update the public on their progress. For anyone not paying attention, it was a stunning revelation. The company's owner Elon Musk explained, "The overarching goal of Neuralink is to create, ultimately, a whole brain interface – a generalised input/output device that, in the long-term, literally can interface with every aspect of your brain".

This is two-way mind control that taps each neuron, all-consuming and potentially inescapable.

The event included a familiar video, originally released last spring, where a macaque plays MindPong using nothing but two neural devices implanted in his left and right motor cortices. The monkey stares at the screen, slurping banana smoothie through a metal tube, and controls the virtual paddle with ease.

There was also new footage of a different macaque, Sake, moving a cursor over a keyboard "telepathically". At first glance, the demo appears to show the monkey typing requests for a snack. This set up is somewhat misleading – the blinking keys prompt the monkey's behaviour – but it's impressive either way.

The current Neuralink device is a quarter-sized processor, installed flush with the skull, with 1,024 hair-thin wires extending into the tissue below. The electrodes read brain signals, which are then translated into sense-impressions and intentions. While the functional chip is currently "read-only", scientists are working hard to "write" onto the brain as well. They're also developing newer models with thousands more wires, providing far higher resolution of neural activity.

FDA approval for human trials is expected in six months. The initial rollout will be for healing – the blind shall see, the lame shall walk, the paralytic shall play Pong with his brain. But that’s just the beginning.

The “prime motivation” is human enhancement in the age of AI. If the Neuralink project succeeds – if this sprouting seed comes to full fruition – Musk will have a commercial brain implant, available to normal people, that functions like a smartphone stuck inside your head. In turn, the resulting neurological models will be used to design increasingly sophisticated AI systems.

“If we have digital superintelligence that’s just much smarter than any human”, Musk speculated, “at a species level, how do we mitigate that risk? And then even in a benign scenario, where the AI is very benevolent, then how do we even go along for the ride?”

His answer is simple. You take the ’trode. You merge your mind with the Machine.

Musk is an easy scapegoat for the outraged mob – or he’s an exalted voodoo idol, depending on the news cycle – but in reality, the guy’s a single figurehead for a vast global movement. He’s just doing his job as an everyman antichrist.

Honestly, I respect Musk far more than his flaccid fanboys, who bark about “evil transhumanists” one day, then fall to their knees when their cyborg saviour throws ’em a bone.

“Hackable animals” indeed.

People have to face the unsettling reality that we are in the throes of a worldwide civilisational transition. The first seeds were planted centuries ago with the dawn of modern science. Those sprouted in the industrial revolution, flow-

So what happens to good ol’ legacy humans? At best, we can expect to be preserved like beasts in a zoo

ered in the post-war period, and today a new generation of mutated shoots have sprung up all over the globe, growing far faster than their predecessors.

The gardeners are tech oligarchs and their government partners. We legacy humans are the fertiliser. First and foremost, this is a transformation of mind and spirit. It’s overhauling the grand vision of what a civilisation and the humans therein are meant to be. Every sacred mythos, if not discarded entirely, is being grafted onto the technological value system of *The Future™*.

Technocracy. Soft eugenics. Bi-digital convergence. Man-machine merger. AI deification. Space colonization. The universe as a computer simulation. You know the story.

Closing in on this fevered anticipation and naive normalisation are the actual technical advances. Typically, these lag far behind the propaganda – but not far enough for my comfort levels.

Neuralink actually works. Twitter works. When not bursting into flames, Teslas and Falcon 9 rockets work.

Google works (unless you’re looking for hate facts). Facebook’s social engineering works. Amazon’s robots work. OpenAI’s plagiarizing DALL•E 2 and ChatGPT bots really work.

The smartphone in your hand works. Gain-of-function works. Brain organoids work. To the extent that toxic proteins are a “success”, mRNA jabs work. And most ominously, nuclear missiles work.

The real question is – when the benefits are tallied up, who do these technologies work for?

And what happens if we say no?

The day before Neuralink’s “Show and Tell”, the Oxford philosopher Anders Sandberg published a provocative essay at *The Conversation* entitled “Cyborgs v ‘holdout humans’: what the world might be like if our species survives for a million years”. Echoing other frank transhumanists, Sandberg describes the rise of cyborgs and post-human emulations in terms of branching lineages and subsequent species dominance. “At some point”, he writes, “we are likely to have a planet where humans have largely been replaced by software intelligence or AI – or some combination of the two”.

To put it more bluntly, biological life and cultural life are giving birth to a ravenous swarm of digital life. Tech adoption is necessary to stay competitive. So what happens to good ol’ legacy humans? At best, we can expect to be preserved like beasts in a zoo:

“Natural” humans may remain in traditional societies very unlike those of software people. This is not unlike the Amish people today, whose humble lifestyle is made possible (and protected) by the surrounding United States. It is not given that surrounding societies have to squash small and primitive societies: we have established human rights and legal protections, and something similar could continue for normal humans. ...

If biological humans go extinct, the most likely reason...is a lack of

respect, tolerance, and binding contracts with other post-human species. Maybe a reason for us to start treating our own minorities better.

The unspoken threat is that up-and-coming “minorities” include biohackers and techno trannies. Alongside these protected classes are hordes of chatbots who, according to certain techno-extremists, also qualify as “persons”.

If you don’t want your civilisation transformed, you’d better keep it to yourself – for your own good, and the safety of your fellow zoo animals.

Ln the mid-80’s, my grandfather was a Magnavox quality control manager. Being a proto-cyborg himself, he had an Odyssey 2 console in his basement, with pretty much every game they ever developed. Many were released in 1978 and had splendid black velvet paintings on their cases.

As a boy, my favourites were *Monkey Shines* and *Freedom Fighters*, but there was one cover that really bugged me – *The Quest for the Rings*. Its box and instruction booklet featured wild artwork, but the actual game was just a generic stickman who wielded a stick sword, and another dude who shot pixel balls from his disjointed stick arm.

Being a stupid kid, I held out

If you pay close attention, remembering our species’ deep history, you’ll notice the alien invaders creeping in

hope that the graphics would improve once you reached a certain level. Then one day, I realised the exploding volcanoes in the booklet art were actually those dull squares blinking from blue-to-orange onscreen. It was so disappointing, I never played the game again. Back then, I’d have done anything for a video game as vivid as the dreamworlds depicted on those Odyssey cases. Be careful what you wish for.

Civilisation won’t change all at once. Yet certain things are changing so fast, the shifts are instantly obscured by the memetic tornado. Exotic trends become familiar before we know they’ve arrived.

As you stand on your front step, taking in the crisp winter air, you still find trees firmly rooted in the earth. Cheerful pedestrians are ambling past, enjoying themselves as always.

But if you pay close attention, remembering our species’ deep history, you’ll notice the alien invaders creeping in. One-way mind control

devices in living room windows. Cyborg exoskeletons in every driveway. Two-way mind control devices in every hand.

The celestial spheres are eternal – except for that growing procession of new satellites gliding overhead.

These machines are evolving fast – as are the bipedal primates connected to them. The hardest pill to swallow is that we are all responsible for the direction of human evolution. Most people prefer live for the moment – or lose themselves to empty fantasies – delegating their God-given decisions to some predatory priesthood, or just ignoring the long-term arc altogether.

As a result, elite “experts” and “influencers” are steering our trajectory. If we don’t imagine alternative paths toward the future – tangible realities, beyond their Machine – our betters will dream them up for us.

While they use the planet as their country club, we’ll will be tucked away in zoo cages, playing at mind control in virtual worlds. Never let that door slam behind you.

Cut out the seed before it grows. **CT**

Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. Presently, he lives in the western shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Read his weekly newsletter at www.JOEBOT.xyz.

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ANDY KROLL

Lessons learned in the Internet's darkest corners

A plea for real connection in a “connected” era

We all do it. Make little snap judgments about everyday strangers as we go about our lives. Without giving it a second's thought, we sketch mini biographies of the people we pass on the sidewalk, the guy seated across from us on the train, or the woman in line in front of us at the grocery store.

We wonder: Who are they? Where are they from? How do they make a living? Lately, though, such passing encounters tend to leave me with a sense of suspicion, a wariness tinged with grim curiosity. I think to myself: Is he or she one of them?

By them, I mean one of the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of “people” I encountered during my many forays into the darkest recesses of the Internet. Despite the staggering amount of time many of us spend online – more than six-and-a-half hours a day, according to recent research – we tend to haunt the same websites and social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, CNN, Reddit, Google) again and again.

Not me, though. Over the past five years, I've spent more hours than I wish to count exploring the subterranean hideaways and uncensored gathering spaces for some of the most unhinged communities on the Internet.

Call it an occupational hazard. Only recently, I published my first book, *A Death on W Street: The Murder of Seth Rich and the Age of Conspiracy*, an investigative political thriller that opens with the 2016 street murder of a 27-year-old who had worked for the Democratic National Committee.

In the absence of a culprit, Seth Rich's killing got swept into the fast-flowing conspiratorial currents of that year's presidential race, a contest that pitted an unabashed conspiracy theorist, Donald Trump, against a candidate, Hillary Clinton, who had been the subject of decades' worth of elaborately sinister claims (with no basis in reality).

For my book, I set out to understand how a senseless crime

that took the life of a beloved but hardly famous mid-level political staffer became a national and then international news story, a viral phenomenon of ever more twisted conspiracy theories that reached millions and all too soon became a piece of modern folklore.

To do so, I traced the arc of those Rich conspiracy theories back to

Seth Rich:
Murdered in 2016



Police Photo

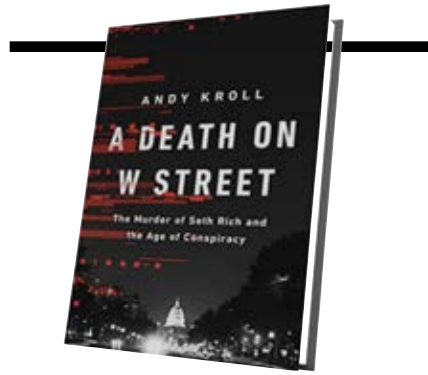
their origins. In practical terms, that meant hundreds of late nights spent huddled over my desk, eyes fixed on my computer screen, clicking and scrolling my way through a seemingly endless trail of tweets, memes, posts, and videos.

The Internet is, in some ways, like an ancient city, its latest incarnation resting atop the ruins of so many civilisations past. I came to think of myself then as an online archaeologist digging my way through the digital eons, sifting through archived websites and seeking out long-vanished posts in search of clues and answers.

Or maybe I was a waste handler, holding my nose as I picked through piles (or do I mean miles?) of toxic detritus that littered old versions of social media sites you'd know like Twitter and Reddit, and others you probably don't, like 4chan, 8kun, and Telegram. It was there that I encountered so many of them, those faceless users, the ones I might have passed on the street, who, with the promise of anonymity, had felt unburdened to voice their unfiltered, often deeply disturbing selves. It was all id, all the time.

Who were these people? I couldn't help but wonder whether they actually believed the stuff they wrote. Or was it all about the thrill of saying it? In an unnervingly boundless online world, were they testing the boundaries of the acceptable by one-upping each other with brazen displays of racism, misogyny, or antisemitism (just to start down the list)?

Firing up my laptop and venturing into those noxious places was like entering an inside-out world impervious to logic and critical thinking. They had their own language – los-



A DEATH ON W STREET
The Murder of Seth Rich
and the Age of Conspiracy

Andy Kroll
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ers were “cucks”, loyal foot soldiers “pedes”, and Hillary Clinton was Hillary “Klanton” – and they operated with their own sets of elaborate but twisted rules and hierarchies. After a few hours of studying such “conversations”, a form of vertigo would set in, a spinning sensation that made me get up from my desk and clear my head with a walk or a conversation with a real human being.

Now that the book is published, I don't spend much time in those disturbing online worlds. Still, every once in a while, I can't help checking in – old habits die hard – despite the horrors I saw there while gathering material for my book. What nags at me even now – in fact, it haunts me in some way – is the knowledge that there were real people behind those toxic accounts. The same people you might sit next to on a bus without having the slightest suspicion of just how disturbed they were and what a disturbing world they were helping create or elaborate. That knowledge still weighs on me.

A confession: on a few of those late nights spent in the online ruins, I caught myself starting to nod along with some of the wild-eyed

nonsense I was reading. Maybe I found a particular Reddit thread surprisingly convincing. Maybe the post in question had sprinkled a few verifiable facts amid the nonsense to make me think, Huh? Maybe my sixth cup of coffee and lack of sleep had so weakened my mental safeguards that madness itself began to seem at least faintly reasonable. When I felt such heretical thoughts seep into my stream of consciousness, I took it as a sure sign that I should log off and go to bed.

Thinking back on those moments, I admit that the first feeling I have is pure and utter embarrassment. I'm an investigative reporter. I make a living dealing in facts, data, and vetted information. Heck, my first job in journalism was as a full-time, trained fact-checker. I should be impervious to the demented siren song of conspiracy theories, right?

The correct answer is indeed: right. And yet...

I realise now that, on those disturbing long nights at the computer, I was more than an avid journalistic explorer of online content. I had immersed myself – and immersion is what the Internet does best. It's the gateway point to a seemingly infinite number of rabbit holes. Who hasn't clicked on a Wikipedia entry about, say, the making of the atomic bomb only to check the time, realise that two hours had slipped by, and you're now watching a YouTube video about the greatest comebacks in baseball history with no memory of how you got here in the first place?

That frictionless glide from one post to the next, video after video, tweet upon tweet, plays tricks on the mind. Spend enough time in

that realm and even the most absurd theories and narratives start to acquire the patina of logic, the ring of reason.

How else to explain the sheer number of QAnon adherents – one in five Americans, according to an analysis by the Public Religion Research Institute – who believe that a secret cabal of paedophile elites, including Tom Hanks and Oprah, run the world, or that the Earth is indeed flat, or that the moon landing more than half a century ago was faked, no matter what news broadcaster Walter Cronkite might have said at the time?

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that conspiracy theories weren't a fixture of American life before the Internet came along. Quite the opposite: for as long as we humans have existed, we've dreamt up elaborate theories and fables to explain the inexplicable or, increasingly in our time, the otherwise all too explicable that we refuse to believe. Some of the

One in five Americans believe that a secret cabal of paedophile elites, including Tom Hanks and Oprah, run the world

afounders of this country were unashamed conspiracy-mongers.

What those delirious late nights at the computer led me to believe, however, is that tools for spreading such fantastical theories have never been more powerful than they are today and they've entered our politics in an unnerving fashion (as anyone paying attention to the January 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol knows). Put simply, we don't stand a chance against the social media companies.

Fuelled by highly sophisticated algorithms that maximize "engagement" at all costs by feeding users ever more inflammatory content, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the rest of them don't simply enter-

tain, inform, or "connect" us.

As *New York Times* reporter Max Fisher writes in his book *The Chaos Machine*, "This technology exerts such a powerful pull on our psychology and our identity, and is so pervasive in our lives, that it changes how we think, behave, and relate to one another. The effect, multiplied across billions of users, has been to change society itself".

Spending so much time burrowing into such websites, I came away with a deep sense of just how addictive they are. More than that, they rewire your mind in real-time. I felt it myself. I fear that there's no path out of our strange, increasingly conspiratorial moment, filled with viral lies and rampant disinformation, without rewriting the algorithms that increasingly govern our lives.

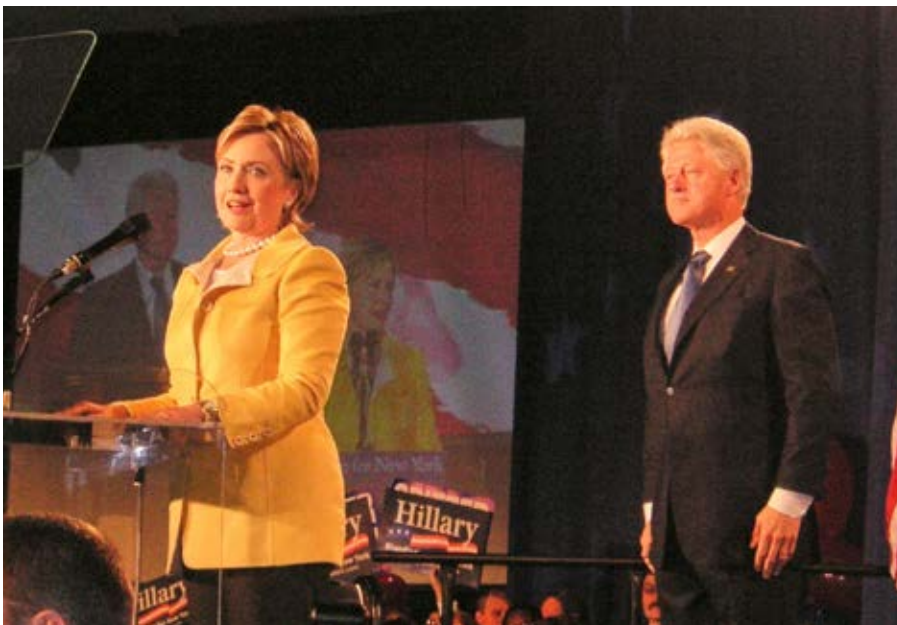
Still, I'm under no illusion that Tweets and memes can adequately explain the schisms in American life and this country's descent into a more embittered, polarised, us-versus-them cultural moment. Nor can Donald Trump, who is as much a product of the strange Internet world of conspiracies as a cause of it.

They are, in fact, the ever-more-virulent symptoms of a country in which it's not enough to disagree with your opponents. You also have to demonise them as subhuman, criminal, and alien, while, in the process, doing genuine harm to yourself.

In what still passes for the real world, how else to explain the prominence of conspiracy theories like QAnon or the current far-right trend of accusing someone, especially anyone who disagrees with you, of being a "groomer"?

Or how do you account for the existence of a seemingly inextinguishable belief now lurking in our world that one of the country's prominent

Wikimedia



BEYOND BELIEF? The Internet has spawned conspiracy theories that suggest that Hillary and Bill Clinton are prolific serial killers.

political families, the Clintons, are also prolific serial killers who have slaughtered dozens, if not hundreds of people?

Or the explosion of those baseless claims I spent all that time exploring about the murdered Seth Rich, claims that would haunt his family for years, denying them even the space to grieve for their own son?

No amount of late-night online sleuthing was going to provide an answer to the larger social ills afflicting this country. Indeed, the more time I spent online, the greater the chasm appeared – so vast, in fact, that I began to wonder whether it could ever be bridged. Nor is this a malady that can be dealt with by politicians or governments, important as they are. It runs even deeper than that.

When I think about the root causes of such societal drift, I return to a phrase I read in a 2021 study that described a “national friendship decline”. According to that survey, “Americans report having fewer close friendships than they once did, talking to their friends less often, and relying less on their friends for personal support”. The data wasn’t all grim. More than four in ten respondents said that they had made a new friend during the pandemic. Still, the lockdowns and self-isolation of these Covid years had exacerbated what the survey’s authors called a “loneliness epidemic”.

When I think about those endless Twitter rants and Reddit screeds I encountered, I envision lonely people hunched over their computers in empty apartments, posting and scrolling madly (sometimes in the

Now more than ever, it’s time to step away from those weapons of mass disinformation

most literal sense) deep into the night. Loneliness and social isolation, of course, can’t explain away all the mad conspiratorial rants you find on the Internet, nor are they the sole cause of the brittle, increasingly dangerous state of American politics.

But it’s so much easier to resent and rage against a perceived enemy if you’ve never met them or anyone like them, so much easier to cast the other side as the out-group or the villain if you’ve never shared a meal or a coffee or a phone call with them. I mention that “loneliness epidemic” only to underscore my belief that healing the schism in our culture and politics will require something more difficult and yet simpler than major policy reforms or electing a new generation of officials. Don’t get me wrong: both of those are needed, on both sides of the proverbial aisle.

Today’s politics too often resemble a race to the bottom, as politicians rush to outflank their rivals and whip up their constituencies (often using social media to do it). All the while, powerful interest groups, their lobbyists, and a growing billionaire class shape (or sink) the

kinds of wholesale changes needed to reboot our political system.

Yet our problems run deeper than that – and the solutions can’t be found in Washington, D.C. One answer is finding ways to knit back together an unbearably frayed nation. Neighbourhood groups, book clubs, sports leagues, civic associations, labour unions, religious groups, whatever it is, the surest way out of this stubborn conflict must come through the simplest of gestures – human connection. The lost art of saying hello.

Tech executives love to talk about the value of “connection” and their goals of “connecting” the world. Almost two decades into the social media era, we should know better than to believe those empty paeans used as cover for the relentless pursuit of profits. Now more than ever, it’s time to step away from those weapons of mass disinformation.

I don’t care much for New Year’s resolutions, but if I did, I would say: let’s make 2023 the year of logging off. Get to know your neighbours and colleagues. For my part, I’ll work on not thinking of those everyday strangers, or even those tiny avatars on the Internet, as them. Instead of fearing them, I’ll think I say hello. **CT**

*Andy Kroll is an investigative journalist with ProPublica based in Washington, D.C. His just-published book is *A Death on W Street: The Murder of Seth Rich and the Age of Conspiracy*. This article was first published at www.tomdispatch.com.*

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MARK CURTIS

11 years after toppling Gaddafi, UK gets Libya oil

British oil giants BP and Shell are returning to the oil-rich north African country just over a decade after the UK plunged it into chaos in its 2011 military intervention, which the British government never admitted was a war for oil

British oil giants BP and Shell are returning to the oil-rich north African country just over a decade after the UK plunged it into chaos in its 2011 military intervention, which the British government never admitted was a war for oil.

In November, Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) agreed for BP to start drilling for and producing natural gas in a major project off the coast of the north African country.

The UK corporation, on whose board sits former MI6 chief Sir John Sawers, controls exploration areas in Libya equivalent to nearly three times the size of Wales.

British officials have long sought to profit from oil in Libya, which contains 48-billion barrels of reserves

– the largest oil resources in Africa, accounting for 3 percent of the world total.

BP is one of the few foreign oil and gas companies with exploration and production licences in Libya. Its assets there were nationalised by Muammar Gaddafi soon after he seized power in a 1969 coup that challenged the entire British position in the country and region.

After years of tensions between the two countries, prime minister Tony Blair met Gaddafi in 2004 and agreed the so-called “Deal in the Desert” which included a \$900-million exploration and production agreement between BP and Libya's NOC.

BP re-entered the country in 2007 but its operations were scuppered by the war of 2011 when British,

French and US forces with the support of Qatar and Islamic militants overthrew Gaddafi. Terrorism and civil war subsequently engulfed the country and oil company operations were put on hold.

The restart of BP's operations follows the signing in 2018 of a memorandum of understanding with the NOC and Eni, the Italian oil major, to resume exploration, with Eni acting as the operator of the oil fields. BP chief executive Bob Dudley hailed the deal as an important step “towards returning to our work in Libya”.

The BP-ENI project, an \$8-billion investment, involves two exploration areas in the onshore Ghadames basin and one in the offshore Sirte basin, covering a total area of around 54,000 km². The Sirte basin concession alone covers an area larger than the size of Belgium.

The UK's other oil major, Shell, is also “preparing to return as a major player” in Libya, the company has stated in a confidential document. After putting its Libyan operations on hold in 2012, the corporation is now planning to explore for new oil and gas fields in several blocks.

A third British company, Petrofac – which provides engineering ser-



Map of BP's concession areas in Libya



The head of Libya's National Oil Corporation, Mustafa Sanalla (2nd from right), discusses with the CEO of BP, Bernard Looney (far right), March 2022.

VICES to oil operations – secured a \$100-million contract in September last year to help develop an oil field known as Erawin in Libya's deep southwest.

Petrofac was at the time under investigation for bribery by the UK's Serious Fraud Office (SFO). One of its executives, global head of sales David Lufkin, had already pleaded guilty in 2019 to 11 counts of bribery.

The month following the award of the Libya contract, the SFO convicted and fined Petrofac on seven counts of bribery between 2011 and 2017. Petrofac pleaded guilty to its senior executives using agents to bribe officials to the tune of £32-million to win oil contracts in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"A key feature of the case", the SFO noted, "was the complex and deliberately opaque methods used by these senior executives to pay agents across borders, disguising

payments through sub-contractors, creating fake contracts for fictitious services and, in some cases, passing bribes through more than one agent and one country, to disguise their actions".

Petrofac works with BP in several countries around the world, including Iraq, Azerbaijan and Oman and in the North Sea.

All three British companies re-entering Libya have strong links to the UK government. In some of the years during which Petrofac was paying bribes, the company was led by Ayman Asfari who with his wife donated almost £800,000 to the Conservative Party between 2009 and 2017.

In 2014, Asfari, who is now a non-executive director of Petrofac, had been appointed by David Cameron to be one of his business ambassadors.

Petrofac, which is incorporated in the tax haven of Jersey, has also benefited from insurance provided by the UK taxpayer via UK Export Finance (UKEF).

In May 2019, when Petrofac was under investigation by the SFO, UKEF provided £700-million in project insurance for the design and operation of an oil refinery at Duqm in the dictatorship of Oman, a project in which Petrofac was named as the sole UK exporter.

In June last year Petrofac was one of five companies sponsoring the official reopening of the British embassy in Tripoli. Ambassador Caroline Hurndall told the audience, "I am especially proud that British businesses are collaborating with Libyan companies and having a meaningful impact upon Libya's economic development. Many of those businesses are represented here tonight".

BP and Shell are especially close

to Whitehall, with a long standing revolving door of personnel between the corporation and former senior civil servants.

Frank Baker, then the ambassador to Libya, wrote in 2018 that the UK was “helping to create a more permissible environment for trade and investment, and to uncover opportunities for British expertise to help Libya’s reconstruction”.

Since then, new ambassador Hurndall has held meetings with Libya’s oil minister, Mohammed Aoun, to discuss the return of UK oil companies to Libya, and the NOC has set up a hub in London, its only one outside Libya and the US.

The NOC’s London unit, launched in early 2021, is poised to “award consultancy and asset management contracts worth hundreds of millions of pounds over the next several years to British companies”, the *Times* reported.

Also heavily promoting British oil interests is the Libyan British Business Council (LBBC), whose president is Lord Trefgarne, a former minister under Margaret Thatcher, and which is chaired by former British ambassador to Libya, Peter Millett. The LBBC, which recently sent a delegation to Libya, says it acts “as an influential and informed advocacy group on behalf of UK business in Libya – in dialogue with the British government” and others.

In October 2018, the LBBC and the NOC signed a ‘statement of intent’ on the subject of “enhanced cooperation in the development of Libya’s oil and gas industry”. It also called for “mutually satisfactory contracts”.

The chair of the NOC, Mustafa Sanalla, said at the time that “the UK is a key partner for Libya in boosting oil production” and welcomed “strengthening this partnership”. The LBBC pledged to “facilitate Chairman Mustafa Sanalla’s access

The country’s civil war has provoked a battle for control over the oil industry which has been described as being in “disarray”

to British government ministers”.

Last year, Libya was the UK’s third largest source of oil, after Norway and the US, supplying 7.8 percent of all British oil imports. Oil is Libya’s lifeline, providing over 90 percent of the country’s revenues.

But the country’s civil war has provoked a battle for control over the oil industry which has been described as being in “disarray”, with “little clarity on who really is in control of the nation’s most valuable resource”.

The UN-backed Government of National Unity, which is supported by the UK, sits in the capital, Tripoli, while in the east of the country sits a rival government. Most of Libya’s oil fields are in the east, which is controlled by commander Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army allied to the eastern government.

In the international rivalry over accessing Libya’s oil, UK ministers have long tried to get British hands on the key resource. Documents uncovered by oil-focused NGO, Platform, in 2009 showed Labour ministers and senior civil servants met Shell to discuss the company’s oil interests in Libya on at least 11 occasions and perhaps as many as 26 times in less than four years.

Shell was one of the first western oil companies to re-enter Libya after the end of United Nations sanctions and a commitment from Gaddafi to

stop funding terrorism and pursuing nuclear weapons.

The 2011 war did not stop the UK pursuing its oil interests. During the early months of the uprising against Gaddafi, British oil trading company Vitol provided rebels with refined petrol in exchange for future delivery of crude oil, thus sustaining their military activities.

Those rebels, which included hardline Islamist forces, were being heavily armed by Qatar with British support. The deal with Vitol was masterminded by Alan Duncan, the former oil trader turned UK foreign minister, who has close business links to the oil firm and subsequently took a paid position with the corporation.

When during 2014 to 2016 and in early 2020 Libyan warlords such as Haftar shut down the Libyan oil industry, Vitol also helped to import refined products.

Once again, UK oil interests look set to be accompanied by a resurgence in the British military presence in Libya. In September this year the UK’s senior military official in the Middle East, Air Marshal Martin Sampson, discussed military training programmes with Libyan prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

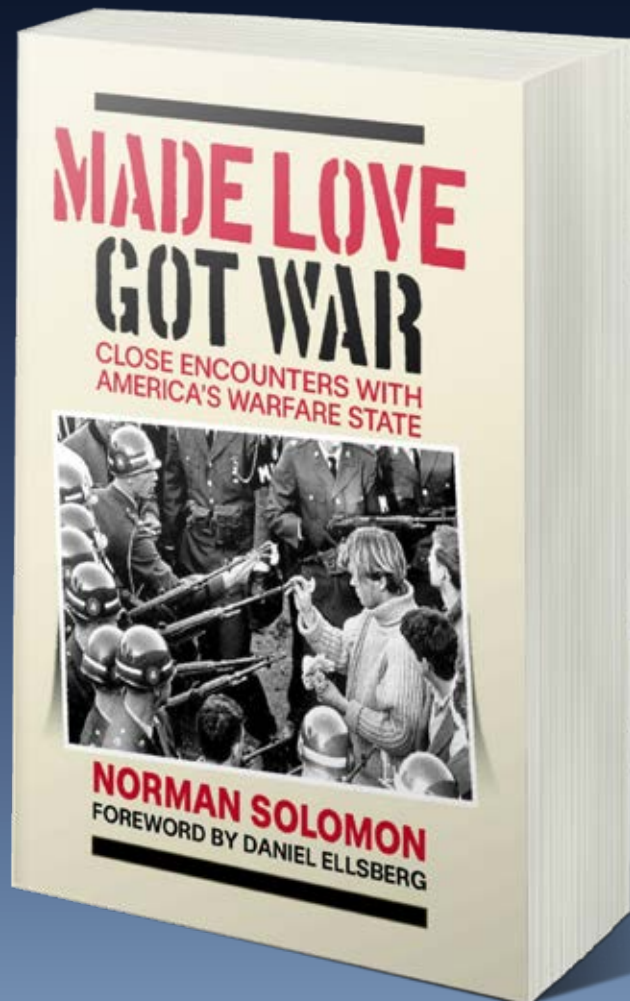
The meeting followed the docking in Tripoli of UK Royal Navy warship HMS Albion, for the first time in eight years. Around a hundred Libyan and foreign dignitaries were hosted aboard Albion, including “senior Libyan political, military, and civil society figures”, the Royal Navy said. **CT**

Mark Curtis is the editor of *Declassified UK*, and the author of five books and many articles on UK foreign policy. This article was first published at www.declassifieduk.org.

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VIJAY PRASHAD

Is this the petrodollar's long goodbye?

As part of their concern about “currency power,” many countries in the Global South are eager to develop non-dollar trade and investment systems

On December 9, China's President Xi Jinping met with the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to discuss deepening ties between the Gulf countries and China.

At the top of the agenda was increased trade between China and the GCC, with the former pledging to “import crude oil in a consistent manner and in large quantities from the GCC” as well to increase imports of natural gas.

In 1993, China became a net importer of oil, surpassing the United States as the largest importer of crude oil by 2017. Half of that oil comes from the Arabian Peninsula, and more than a quarter of Saudi Arabia's oil exports go to China. Despite being a major importer of oil, China has reduced its carbon emissions.

A few days before he arrived in Riyadh, Xi published an article in *al-Riyadh* that announced greater strategic and commercial partnerships with the region, including “cooperation in high-tech sectors including 5G communications, new energy, space, and digital economy.”

Saudi Arabia and China signed commercial deals worth

\$30 billion, including in areas that would strengthen the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi's visit to Riyadh is one of his few overseas trips since the Covid-19 pandemic.

His first was to Central Asia for the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September, where the nine member states (which represent 40 percent of the world's population) agreed to increase trade with each other using their local currencies.

At this first China-GCC summit, Xi urged the Gulf monarchs to “make full use of the Shanghai Petrol and Gas Exchange as a platform to conduct oil and gas sales using Chinese currency.” Earlier this year, Saudi Arabia suggested that it might accept Chinese yuan rather than US dollars for the oil it sells to China.

While no formal announcement was made at the GCC summit nor in the joint statement issued by China and Saudi Arabia, indications abound that these two countries will move closer toward using the Chinese yuan to denominate their trade. However, they will do so slowly, as they both remain exposed to the US economy. (China

holds just under \$1 trillion in US Treasury bonds).

Talk of conducting China-Saudi trade in yuan has raised eyebrows in the United States, which for 50 years has relied on the Saudis to stabilise the dollar. In 1971, the US government withdrew the dollar from the gold standard and began to rely on central banks around the world to hold monetary reserves in US Treasury securities and other US financial assets.

When oil prices skyrocketed in 1973, the US government decided to create a system of dollar seigniorage through Saudi oil profits. In 1974, US Treasury Secretary William Simon – fresh off the trading desk at the investment bank Salomon Brothers – arrived in Riyadh with instructions from US President Richard Nixon to have a serious conversation with the Saudi oil minister, Ahmed Zaki Yamani.

Simon proposed that the US purchase large amounts of Saudi oil in dollars and that the Saudis use these dollars to buy US Treasury bonds and weaponry and invest in US banks as a way to recycle vast Saudi oil profits. And so, the petrodollar was born, which anchored the new dollar-denominated world trade and investment system.

If the Saudis even hinted towards



Xi Jinping meets Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on December 9, 2020.

withdrawing this arrangement, which would take at least a decade to implement, it would seriously challenge the monetary privilege afforded to the US

As Gal Luft, co-director of the Institute for Analysis of Global Security, told *The Wall Street Journal*, “The oil market, and by extension the entire global commodities market, is the insurance policy of the status of the dollar as reserve currency. If that block is taken out of the wall, the wall will begin to collapse.”

The petrodollar system received two serious sequential blows.

First, the 2007–08 financial crisis suggested that the Western banking system is not as stable as imagined. Many countries, including large developing nations, hurried to find other procedures for trade and investment.

The establishment of BRICS by

Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa is an illustration of this urgency to “discuss the parameters for a new financial system.” A series of experiments have been conducted by BRICS countries, such as the creation of a BRICS payment system.

Second, as part of its hybrid war, the US has used its dollar power to sanction over 30 countries. Many of these countries, from Iran to Venezuela, have sought alternatives to the US-dominated financial system to conduct normal commerce.

When the US began to sanction Russia in 2014 and deepen its trade war against China in 2018, the two powers accelerated upon processes of dollar-free trade that other sanctioned states had already begun forming out of necessity.

At that time, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin called for the de-dollarisation of the oil trade. Moscow began to hurriedly reduce its dollar holdings and maintain its assets in gold and other currencies. In 2015, 90 percent of bilateral trade between China and Russia was conducted in dollars, but by 2020 it fell below 50 percent.

When Western countries froze Russian central bank reserves held in their banks, this was tantamount to “crossing the Rubicon,” as economist Adam Tooze wrote. “It brings conflict in the heart of the international monetary system. If the central bank reserves of a G20 member entrusted to the accounts of another G20 central bank are not sacrosanct, nothing in the financial world is. We are at financial war.”

BRICS and sanctioned countries have begun to build new institu-

tions that could circumvent their reliance on the dollar. Thus far, banks and governments have relied upon the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) network, which is run through the US Federal Reserve's Clearing House Interbank Payment Services and its Fedwire Funds Service. Countries under unilateral US sanctions – such as Iran and Russia – were cut off from the SWIFT system, which connects 11,000 financial institutions across the globe.

After the 2014 US sanctions, Russia created the System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS), which is mainly designed for domestic users but has attracted central banks from Central Asia, China, India and Iran.

In 2015, China created the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), run by the People's Bank of China, which is gradually being used by other central banks.

Alongside these developments by Russia and China are a range of other options, such as payment networks rooted in new advances in financial technology (fintech) and central bank digital currencies.

Although Visa and Mastercard are the largest companies in the industry, they face new rivals in China's UnionPay and Russia's Mir, as well as China's private retail mechanisms such as Alipay and WeChat Pay.

About half of the countries in the world are experimenting with forms of central bank digital currencies, with the digital yuan (e-CNY) as one of the more prominent monetary platforms that has already begun to side-line the dollar in the Digital Silk Roads established alongside the BRI.

As part of their concern over “currency power,” many countries

Now, with the end of carbon as a possibility, the Gulf Arabs are eager for diversification

in the Global South are eager to develop non-dollar trade and investment systems. Fernando Haddad, Brazil's new minister of finance, has championed the creation of a South American digital currency called the sur (meaning “south” in Spanish) in order to create stability in interregional trade and to establish “monetary sovereignty.”

The sur would build upon a mechanism already used by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay called the Local Currency Payment System or SML.

A March report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) entitled “The Stealth Erosion of Dollar Dominance” showed that “the share of reserves held in US dollars by central banks dropped by 12 percentage points since the turn of the century, from 71 percent in 1999 to 59 percent in 2021.”

The data shows that central bank reserve managers are diversifying their portfolios with Chinese renminbi (or yuan), which accounts for a quarter of the shift, and to non-traditional reserve currencies (such as Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and Singaporean dollars; Danish and Norwegian kroner; Swedish krona, Swiss francs and the Korean won).

“If dollar dominance comes to an end,” concludes the IMF, “then the greenback could be felled not by the dollar's main rivals but by a broad

group of alternative currencies.”

Global currency exchange exhibits aspects of a network-effect monopoly. Historically, a universal medium emerged to increase efficiency and reduce risk, rather than a system in which each country trades with others using different currencies. For years, gold was the standard.

Any singular universal mechanism is hard to displace without force of some kind. For now, the US dollar remains the major global currency, accounting for just under 60 percent of official foreign exchange reserves. Under the prevailing conditions of the capitalist system, China would have to allow for the full convertibility of the yuan, end capital controls and liberalise its financial markets in order for its currency to replace the dollar as the global currency.

These are unlikely options, which means that there will be no imminent dethroning of dollar hegemony, and talk of a “petroyuan” is premature.

In 2004, the Chinese government and the GCC initiated talks over a Free Trade Agreement. The agreement, which stalled in 2009 due to tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is now back on the table as the Gulf finds itself drawn into the BRI.

In 1973, the Saudis told the US that they wanted “to find ways to usefully invest the proceeds [of oil sales] in their own industrial diversification, and other investments that contributed something to their national future.”

No real diversification was possible under the conditions of the petrodollar regime. Now, with the end of carbon as a possibility, the Gulf Arabs are eager for diversification, as exemplified by Saudi Vision 2030, which has been integrated into the

BRI. China has three advantages which aid this diversification that the US does not: a complete industrial system, a new type of productive force (immense-scale infrastructure project management and development) and a vast growing consumer market.

Western media has been near silent on the region's humiliating loss of economic prestige and dominance during Xi's trip to Riyadh. China can now simultaneously navigate complex relations with Iran, the GCC, Russia and Arab League states. Furthermore, the West cannot ignore the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's expansion into West Asia and North Africa. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Qatar are either affiliated or in discussions with the SCO, whose role is evolving.

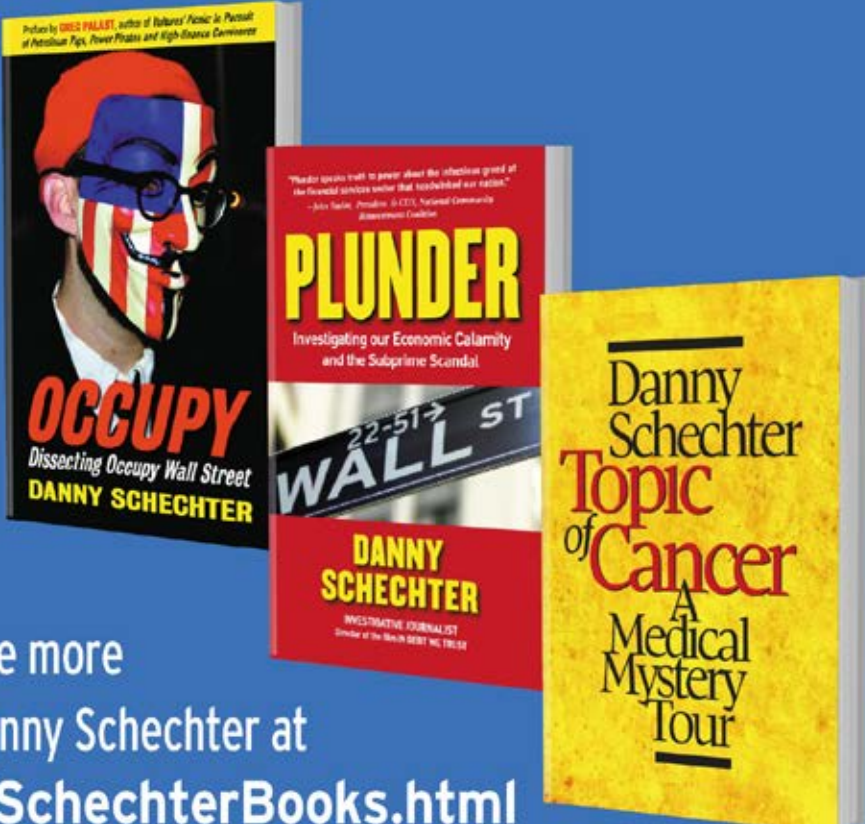
The West cannot ignore the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's expansion

Five months ago, US President Joe Biden visited Riyadh with far less pomp and ceremony – and certainly with less on the table to strengthen weakened relations between the US and Saudi Arabia.

When asked about Xi's trip to Riyadh, the US State Department's spokesperson said, "We are not telling countries around the world to choose between the United States and the PRC." That statement itself is perhaps a sign of weakness. **CT**

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