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MARCH 2026

The Nation Nominates Minneapolis for the Nobel Peace Prize

WANTED

KRISTI NOEM

IMPEACH HER, CONVICT HER, REMOVE HER

FOR

- SHREDDING THE CONSTITUTION
- OBSTRUCTING CONGRESS
- BRINGING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION TO AMERICAN CITIES

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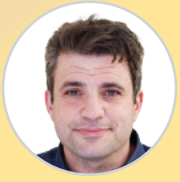

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With appreciation,

Katrina vanden Heuvel

Editor and Publisher, *The Nation*

Use the QR code to visit Nation Cruise.com

Sea of tents: A camp for displaced Palestinians in Gaza City on January 28.

FEATURES

OMAR AL-QATTAA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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EDITORIAL/KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL AND JOHN NICHOLS FOR *THE NATION*

Impeach Kristi Noem

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN USED THE FIRST GREAT PROTEST SONG OF 2026, HIS "STREETS of Minneapolis," to deliver a blistering condemnation of the violent assault that a strike force of 3,000 masked and armed agents of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has waged on Minnesota's largest city. The American bard describes how, during the first weeks of January, Minneapolis became "a city aflame…'neath an occupier's boots" and recounts that "there were bloody footprints where mercy should have stood and two left to die on snow-filled streets: Alex Pretti and Renee Good." Springsteen was not merely mourning; he was calling out the Trump administration's propagandistic distortion of the truth about Pretti, an intensive-care nurse with the Department of Veterans Affairs, gunned down by Border Patrol agents on January 24, and Good, a poet and mother of three, shot in the head by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent on January 7. And the Boss excoriated "Noem's dirty lies."

The lies told by DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, including wildly unfounded assertions that Good and Pretti committed acts of "domestic terrorism," have inspired widespread demands for accountability for the most dangerously dishonest of Donald Trump's miserable cast of cabinet appointees. There is plenty of competition for the "worst of the worst" title in Trump's cabinet. But Noem's attempts to defend the indefensible, her personal and official scandals, her mismanagement, and above all her outrageous and propagandistic lies about Good and Pretti are not merely shameful. They are impeachable.

Members of Congress, no matter their political affiliation, must recognize a constitutional duty to remove this gangster from the position of public trust that she has so flagrantly abused. The will of the people is already clear. Trump and Noem thought they could intimidate the public into quiescence. But tens of thousands of Americans have filled the streets of Minneapolis and cities across the country to demand the abolition of ICE because they have chosen to believe their own eyes, as opposed to Noem's lies.

Congress has a constitutional duty to remove this gangster from the position of public trust she's abused.

The arguments against Noem are now so stark that even senior Republicans are making the case for her removal, with North Carolina Senator Thom Tillis raging against "the incompetence of the leader of the [Department of] Homeland Security," adding, "She doesn't know how to lead, how to de-escalate. She's exposing ICE officers to dangerous situations; she's exposing US citizens to deadly situations." Even as Trump tried to distance himself from some of Noem's most extreme statements and policies in late January, the president's response to Tillis and to Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, another Republican who's said the secretary should go, was to call the senators "losers" and announce that Noem would be staying because "she's doing a very good job."

With Trump digging in, it falls to members of Congress to act. Many Democrats have done just that, as part of the most significant accountability movement yet seen during the year of chaos that Trump and his noxious inner circle of aides, such as Stephen Miller, have unleashed. In addition to tentative calls from Republicans for Noem's resignation or firing, a robust movement to impeach the cabinet secretary has attracted support from over 180 House Democrats as of February 2. Supporters of impeachment have rallied around a resolution sponsored by Representative Robin Kelly (D-IL) that indicts Noem for obstructing the congressional oversight of detention facilities operated by DHS; for "using her position for personal gain while inappropriately using taxpayer dollars"; for "using her position to circumvent the Federal contracting process and [funnel] Federal funds to her friends' businesses"; and for "repeatedly [violating] the Immigration and Nationality Act, the First and Fourth Amendments of the United States Constitution, and due process rights of American citizens by directing [ICE] to make widespread warrantless arrests, forgo due process, and use violence against United States citizens, lawful residents, and other individuals."

The resolution notes that, in the case of Renee Good, "despite video showing the officer on the side of the vehicle while firing and the vehicle was moving away from the officer on

the second and third shots, Kristi Lynn Arnold Noem is claiming publicly that the officer was in danger and in front of the vehicle when he fired." That lie points to the most compelling argument for Noem's removal: She is a determined propagandist who seeks to distort the truth, undermine investigations, and divide Americans. And all the evidence suggests that she intends to keep lying to the American people, the media, and Congress.

None of the House members who propose to impeach Noem are naïve. They know that the full constitutional promise of the impeachment power has been undermined by Senate Republicans who have refused to hold members of their own party—including Trump himself—to account. And they know that House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) will do everything in his power to thwart accountability for Trump and his appointees—just as he did during the fight over the release of files regarding the convicted child-sex offender and longtime Trump associate Jeffrey Epstein. But the anger over Noem's reckless actions and scorching dishonesty has momentum, which could force congressional action in much the way that US Representatives Ro Khanna (D-CA) and Thomas Massie (R-KY) ultimately did in their fight for the release of the Epstein files.

Khanna has emerged as an ardent supporter of Noem's impeachment because "she's presided over agents who are killing American citizens." The California representative includes Noem's impeachment on a list of steps that, he says, must be taken to rein in ICE and DHS. "Congress is not powerless. Democrats must unify around an actual agenda," argues Khanna, who urges opposition to future DHS funding, a repeal of the multiyear $75 billion in funding for ICE that Congress approved last year, investigations and prosecutions of ICE agents who have broken the law, and a strategy to "tear down and replace ICE with an agency that has oversight."

To that list, we would add formal action by Congress to bar ICE agents from interfering with the 2026 midterms.

We understand that some will ask why Noem's impeachment should be a priority with so many threats to be addressed and so many other members of the Trump administration who merit removal (including Trump himself). Our answer is that this is an accountability movement that has gained traction, has the potential to attract at least some Republican support, and above all will send a message to the whole administration that, to quote Springsteen, "We'll remember the names of those who died on the streets of Minneapolis"—and the lies that have been told about Renee Good, Alex Pretti, and all the others who have died on Kristi Noem's watch. N

THE EDITORS

Nobel Nomination

For their brave, nonviolent resistance to authoritarianism, The Nation *has nominated the people of Minneapolis for the Nobel Peace Prize.*

THE EDITORS OF *THE NATION* HAVE FORmally nominated the city of Minneapolis for the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize. Our submission to the Norwegian Nobel Committee explains that, as longtime observers of the struggles to establish peace and justice in the United States and around the world, and as the editors of a magazine that is proud to have included several Nobel laureates on our editorial board and masthead—including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—we believe that Minneapolis and its people merit consideration for the Peace Prize.

While individuals and organizations have been honored with this prize since its inception in 1901, no municipality has ever been recognized. But in these unprecedented times, we strongly believe that the case can be made that the people of Minneapolis have met and exceeded the committee's standard of promoting "democracy and human rights, and work aimed at creating a better organized and more peaceful world."

The people of Minneapolis have suffered countless abuses since the Trump administration dispatched a shock force of more than 3,000 masked and armed federal agents to the area as part of an anti-immigrant "surge." They have been harassed, detained, deported, and injured. Renee Nicole Good, a poet and mother of three, and Alex Jeffrey Pretti, an intensive-care nurse, were gunned down on the city's streets. "This is more about, tragically, terrorizing people than it is about safety," warned Mayor Jacob Frey.

Minneapolis has responded to these horrors with peaceful mass demonstrations, nonviolent civil disobedience, and the development of mutual-aid networks to protect the most vulnerable. The moral leadership of its people has set an example for those struggling against fascism everywhere on the face of this troubled planet, and this, we believe, merits recognition through the award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Dr. King, who served as *The Nation*'s civil-rights correspondent from 1961 to 1966, noted when he received the Peace Prize in 1964 that the award recognizes those who are "moving with determination and a majestic scorn for risk and danger to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice." Minneapolis has done precisely that. N

COMMENT/KEITH ELLISON

Why We Fight

Trump is attacking the very foundations of our Constitution. We have an obligation to resist.

Operation Metro Surge, the Trump administration campaign that has targeted the city of Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota, which I serve as attorney general, appears to be the single largest deployment of immigration agents in the history of the United States. This domestic invasion has inflicted tremendous damage on our state.

Federal agents have killed two people in two weeks—Renee Nicole Good, a 37-year-old poet and mother of three, and Alex Jeffrey Pretti, a 37-year-old ICU nurse who worked at the Minneapolis VA hospital. (There has been at least one additional nonlethal shooting.)

Agents have stopped countless numbers of people and demanded, in effect, that they show their papers—in America. We have seen door-to-door searches where agents barge into people's homes without cause. We have seen stores shuttered, markets shut down, restaurants under siege, employees afraid to go to work, and students afraid to go to school. We will be living with the scars from these abuses for years to come.

That is why my office sued the Trump administration. We sought a restraining order to halt Operation Metro Surge in its tracks. The lawsuit that we filed was, to my mind, necessitated by the federal government's unprecedented abuse of the Constitution and by President Trump's overt promise of "retribution" against the state of Minnesota. We have been able to marshal facts to show that the reason Trump's domestic army has flooded our state is not because we have an especially large population of undocumented immigrants. Rather, we have been targeted because Trump sees us as his political enemy. That is a violation of our First Amendment right to free expression.

In addition, the 10th Amendment gives Minnesota dual sovereignty with the federal government. Yet we have seen the White House try to force elected leaders to bend to its will rather than to the will of the people of our state. The federal government has deployed more than 3,000 masked and heavily armed agents to achieve what Congress or a court would never grant: coerced control over the politics of Minnesotans.

People may ask, "Why is Minnesota having to deal with this targeted oppression?" One answer is that we voted against the president three elections in a row—something he has publicly said he resents deeply. But there's a deeper, truer answer: Trump has gone after us because of who we are and what we value.

We welcome strangers. We see refugees as cherished members of our community, not as threats. We take care of the vulnerable among us. We want to be a great place for everyone to live—no matter where they come from. And, while we of course believe in the rule of law, we also believe that immigration is not a sin.

In short, Trump hates us because we love each other.

To those watching this madness unfold from elsewhere in America: I submit to you that just as Portland and Chicago and Los Angeles were precursors to Minneapolis, Minneapolis is a precursor to a whole lot of other cities and states, including Maine, that Trump has his eye on. If we don't stop this behavior in Minnesota, it will only expand—and that won't be good for anyone in our country.

We need to recognize that this is a constitutional test for Minnesota and for the entire nation. This reality has led me to think a good deal recently about first principles, and about the very premises on which this nation was founded.

Think about how things started. Ask yourself: What happened at the Boston Massacre in 1770? Imperial British agents, under orders from a faraway power, were sent to a local community and shot down protesters. The framers of the Constitution had experienced that abuse and many others. When they wrote the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, they had in mind powerful central governments that used force against communities and the people who live in them. Those were the concerns that led them to establish the separation of powers and our system of federalism.

We need to recognize that this is a constitutional test for Minnesota, and for the entire nation.

The very purpose of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights was to stop the kind of events that are going on in Minneapolis right now. These founding principles are now under attack. We were told that this could happen. In *The Federalist Papers*, we were warned that unscrupulous, unethical leaders could arise, and that they had to be restrained. We were told that if you have a corrupt federal authority that allows federal agents to commit crimes with impunity, local authorities have the right and the prerogative and the obligation to do something about it.

As the attorney general of Minnesota, I am prepared to take my obligation to the people I serve, and to the Constitution of the United States, seriously. I have the obligation to do something about it. And I have the duty to stand with my fellow Minnesotans, and with all Americans who value peace, justice, and the rule of law. If we do that—if we stand together, work together, resist together—we will win. N

Keith Ellison is the 30th attorney general of Minnesota.

COMMENT / BRYCE COVERT

The Real Scandal

There is minimal fraud in childcare subsidies. The true outrage is what's legal under TANF.

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION RECENTLY RESURFACED decade-old allegations of fraud among childcare providers in Minnesota to launch a crusade against what it is characterizing as a rampant misuse of federal funds. Those earlier fraud allegations have already been investigated; at least a dozen people and centers in Minnesota were charged (see Chris Lehmann's "Somali Slander" on page 10 of this issue). But that doesn't matter to the Trump administration. "Governor Walz's administration is taking away money from working families and giving it to fake daycare scams," Health and Human Services Deputy Secretary Jim O'Neill claimed, evidence-free, on X.

If the Trump administration were truly concerned about fraud in social-services spending, it wouldn't start by targeting childcare subsidies. It would start with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which was turned into a slush fund for states in the 1990s. And it would start not in blue Minnesota but in deep-red Mississippi. Between 2016 and 2020, Mississippi organizations that received TANF funding to conduct things like workforce development and teen-pregnancy prevention misspent or stole at least $77 million from the programs. Brett Favre, the former NFL quarterback, and former governor Phil Bryant were among those who orchestrated the schemes, which included $5 million to build a volleyball stadium at the University of Southern Mississippi. Although some of those involved in the scheme have pleaded guilty and await sentencing, Bryant hasn't faced any charges. Favre faces a civil lawsuit.

Five years after the fraud was uncovered, just 5 percent of the state's TANF money actually goes toward cash payments for needy families. The rest of the money can be used for a huge universe of activities, and that's perfectly legal. In this, Mississippi is not unique. Before 1996, the program TANF replaced—Aid to Families With Dependent Children—was focused mostly on giving poor families cash to meet their basic needs. President Clinton's welfare "reform" made cash assistance harder to get and allowed states to use the remaining funds for all sorts of other purposes. Less than a quarter of TANF money today goes toward basic assistance, down 71 percent since the 1990s. TANF funding is spent on things states would otherwise fund themselves, including child welfare and preschool. Several states spend it on college scholarships that can go to families making six figures. The results are clear: In 1996, for every 100 poor families who applied, 68 got assistance; in 2023, just 21 did. Equally troubling, states don't have to track the outcomes for the TANF money they spend and are required to send only minimal information back to the federal government. It's easy to see how the fraud in Mississippi might unfold. That doesn't seem to bother the Trump administration. Under the Biden administration, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) asked Mississippi to repay nearly $101 million that it said was misused under Governor Bryant. Last April, the Trump administration rescinded that penalty, saying the administration would issue a new one at the "appropriate time."

Meanwhile, Trump and his administration have used the allegations in Minnesota to attack social programs of every kind all over the country. The program taking the heaviest fire is the Child Care and Development Fund, the main source of federal funding for childcare subsidies. The administration said it was freezing all CCDF funding to Minnesota, California, Colorado, Illinois, and New York, claiming it is "concerned by the potential for extensive and systemic fraud," even though the error rate for the CCDF, which includes potential fraud as well as instances in which programs were actually underpaid, is less than 4 percent. After the states filed suit, a judge issued a ruling blocking the freeze.

HHS is also requiring all states to participate in a new "defend the spend" system before they can get the CCDF money Congress appropriated for them; the administration has said it will require receipts and photographs before the funding will be released. The administration has also moved to rescind rules that have stabilized funding for providers who accept childcare subsidies.

The Trump administration has targeted Minnesota with additional punitive cuts. The Department of Agriculture announced it was blocking all federal funding to Minnesota, including for food stamps and school lunches, until the state provides unspecified "payment justifications." The Small Business Administration has cut off thousands of Minnesota borrowers and blocked the state's annual funding. The administration has made it clear that Minnesota is the testing ground for a weapon it plans to wield against other states. In his announcement about the new "defend the spend" step in CCDF funding, O'Neill said that fraud "appears to be rampant in Minnesota and across the country."

Fraud does occur in social-services programs, but Republicans rarely call for more funding to better police them. Instead, allegations of fraud are used to drain these programs of money. The Trump administration is counting on the public to believe that the reason people can't seem to scrape by is not because of our skimpy social-safety net but because some fraudsters have stolen from them. N

Minnesota is the testing ground for a weapon the administration plans to wield against other states.

COMMENT/ERIC BLANC, WES McENANY, AND CLAIRE SANDBERG

Boycott ICE

How to hit the agency and its corporate lackeys where it hurts.

RENEE GOOD'S MURDER BY AN ICE AGENT IN MINNEapolis has left millions wondering how we can stop ICE from terrorizing our communities. Two recent victories show a promising path forward: We can target businesses that work with ICE.

ICE relies heavily on the private sector to help carry out its Gestapo-like crusade against immigrants and their allies. Without the logistical, financial, and political support of business, its capacity to terrorize our communities would crumble. Recently, activists successfully pushed Avelo Airlines to stop running deportation charter flights, and workers in Minneapolis forced a local Hilton affiliate to stop renting rooms to ICE agents. These wins are just a fraction of what could be achieved if millions of people pressured all companies to stop working with ICE.

ICE relies heavily on the private sector to help carry out its Gestapo-like tactics against immigrants and their allies.

The most important thing for pro-democracy movements to do is to peel away a regime's "pillars of support." Businesses are society's most important non-state institutions, and most of the biggest ones in America are collaborating with President Trump.

These corporations have huge financial and political power. It may seem like they'll never be brought to heel. But the Avelo and Hilton developments show the immense leverage that consumers and workers have.

Campaigns can start with petitions and social-media callouts, then escalate to one-day boycotts. Workers can circulate petitions calling on their CEOs to cut ties with ICE and organize actions like sick-outs.

Tactics can include rallies in front of targeted stores, leafleting customers about a company's ICE contracts or collaboration, and nonviolent civil disobedience that makes it clear that business as usual won't stand. Other creative ideas include setting up anonymous tip lines for employees to blow the whistle on nonpublic ICE collaborations; pressuring job sites to stop featuring ICE listings; asking small businesses to post "Immigrants Welcome Here" placards; and writing online reviews calling out a company's collaboration with ICE.

Online trainings can give large numbers of people the tools they need to get started. Unions, immigrant-rights groups, and organizations like Indivisible and the Democratic Socialists of America can support the campaign. Politicians can use their platforms to build momentum.

The most strategic corporate targets fall into one of three categories: low-lift national targets, high-lift national targets, and local targets. Low-lift national targets are mostly public-facing companies with relatively small ICE contracts that are set to expire soon, making them particularly vulnerable to pressure. Here are some examples:

Motorola Solutions (a $15.6 million tactical-communications-infrastructure contract with ICE, expiring May 2026).

LexisNexis (a $22.1 million data-brokerage contract, ending February 28, 2026; this company is particularly vulnerable to pressure from university students and professors' unions).

Comcast (a $24,600 network contract for ICE's Seattle office, expiring in May 2026).

AT&T (a $90.8 million IT and network contract with a potential end date of July 2032).

Home Depot and **Lowe's** are using AI-powered license-plate readers and feeding this data into law-enforcement surveillance systems accessible by ICE. Their parking lots are also regular sites of ICE raids that target day laborers. (A spokesperson for Home Depot told *The Nation*, "These cameras are used for the purpose of detecting and preventing theft and protecting the safety of our customers and associates. We do not grant access to our license-plate readers to federal law enforcement.")

High-lift national targets have deeper relationships with ICE. Two in particular need to be tackled:

Amazon provides ICE with the digital backbone for its data and surveillance operations through Amazon Web Services. (Amazon's Whole Foods stores are a rich potential target for nonviolent disruption.) And **Palantir** provides ICE with data platforms that integrate and analyze information from many databases so agents can search, link, and manage deportation operations.

Local targets can be found in communities throughout the country, where hundreds of smaller businesses have ICE contracts. Activists can target these businesses—from contractors providing services to ICE offices to suppliers selling equipment—creating pressure in every region where ICE operates. Hotels that rent rooms to ICE agents are particularly good targets.

Obviously, the stakes are highest for our undocumented friends and families. But this fight impacts all of us. To stop Trump's authoritarian oligarchy, we need millions of people—well beyond our normal circles of activists—to join the fight. We need to start building the organizing muscle and connective tissue now for widespread nonviolent disruption.

Strategic organizing to win justice for all is the best way to honor the memory of Renee Good and the countless other victims of Trump's inhumanity at home and abroad. **N**

Eric Blanc is a professor of labor studies at Rutgers. Wes McEnany was the deputy labor-policy director of the Senate HELP Committee. Claire Sandberg was the national organizing director for Bernie Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign.

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Town Called Malice

CHRIS LEHMANN

Somali Slander

The pretext for ICE's presence in Minneapolis is a racist, fearmongering lie.

For weeks after Renee Good's murder, the MAGA right trained Zapruder-grade forensic attention on the video footage of her last moments in Minneapolis, hoping to convince Americans that they can't trust the plain evidence before their eyes. This effort yielded obscene derangements of the truth, such as "border czar" Tom Homan's contention that Jonathan Ross, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent who gunned down Good, had "feared for his life"—a claim that's hard to square with his decision to position himself in front of her car, and yet more of a whopper in view of her last words, directed to Ross: "That's fine, dude. I'm not mad at you." Never to be outdone in the shameless recitation of official lies, Vice President JD Vance defiled bedrock norms of honest public discourse to smear Good as a "deranged leftist" responsible for her own death. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, the sadist who gloried in the detention and torture of immigrants at El Salvador's CECOT prison, dubbed Good a "domestic terrorist" hours after her murder and just kept going, announcing a fresh deployment of hundreds more ICE agents to Minneapolis in mid-January.

Noem's escalation, which nonsensically vows to mobilize more rogue ICE agents to pacify a crisis sparked by rogue ICE agents, perpetuates the lie that the Trump administration's rolling sieges of cities governed by political opponents are a legitimate use of peacekeeping force. But it also supplies an inadvertent reminder that the whole ICE mission in Minneapolis is founded on a racist lie. President Trump authorized the agency's initial operation there in the wake of a video released online by MAGA influencer Nick Shirley purporting to document widespread fraud in federally subsidized daycare centers run by Somali immigrants in Minneapolis. Shirley's investigations yielded no real evidence—several of the centers he tried to depict as empty of kids and hence hotbeds of graft were simply leery about giving a random man and his film crew access to their charges. (Grim irony alert: At one center, employees thought that Shirley's masked-up crew could have been ICE agents intending to round up preschool children.) Another daycare center appears to have been in the midst of an employee shift change when Shirley's crew showed up.

It's true that state watchdogs have found some evidence of fraud in Minnesota daycare facilities, some run by Somalis in Minneapolis. In 2019, state prosecutors filed charges against a dozen centers and individuals; in response, Minnesota created a new agency to oversee licensing for the centers. After Shirley's video went viral, the agency conducted unscheduled compliance visits at nine of the 10 centers featured in it (one had been shuttered several years ago). Eight of the centers that the inspectors dropped in on showed no irregularities, and one had yet to open for the day. State regulators say they're still monitoring the facilities.

Shirley's video relies mostly on charges floated by David Hoch, a lobbyist and former right-wing candidate for Minnesota attorney general. As *The Intercept*'s Jacqueline Sweet has reported, Hoch had posted anti-Somali broadsides on his since-deleted Instagram account: "EVERY Somali in MN is engaged in fraud. ALL of them," one read; "Even the Blacks have had enough of the demon Muslims," declared another. This is the narrative that the Trump administration has glommed onto, which is why Vance has anointed Shirley's video as Pulitzer-caliber investigative journalism. Trump has also suggested, again without evidence, that Somali immigrants have committed widespread fraud involving Covid relief and nutrition assistance; he's called them "garbage" and said he doesn't "want them in our country." In another two-minute tirade, Trump said that Somalia is "not even a nation. It's just people walking around killing each other. Look, these Somalians have taken billions of dollars out of our country. Billions and billions. They have a representative, Ilhan Omar, who they say married her brother. It's a fraud." The president's White House apparatchiks have gleefully echoed these sentiments and rushed to lend credence to the bogus cause of the Minneapolis ICE deployment; Noem and FBI Director Kash Patel said that the feds would be stepping up fraud investigations as part of ICE operations there. (Though in another twist, the Trump regime's fascist narratives are now collapsing upon one another—the two federal attorneys assigned to Somali fraud duty were among the six Minnesota-based prosecutors who resigned after the Justice Department instructed them to launch a McCarthyite investigation into the activist history of Renee Good's widow, Becca Good.)

ICE was only ever turned loose on Minneapolis residents to stage a spectacle of racialized predation.

It's important to recall the racist moral panic underwriting the original ICE deployment to Minneapolis, a reminder that none of this has ever been about the cut-and-dried enforcement of

Once a crusade of state violence targets one population, it has no incentive to stop there.

immigration law. ICE was turned loose on Minneapolis residents to stage a spectacle of racialized predation, proceeding solely on the imputation of criminal traits to a population group based on national origin, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. This is the far-from-subtle message that Noem now has emblazoned on her podium at press events: "One of ours, all of yours." (The slogan can be traced in substance, if not in precise phrasing, to the fascist movements of the 20th century, which endorsed the idea that the life of one of their loyalists was worth those of all of their enemies.) After Good's execution in Minneapolis, the Trump White House again sought to steer MAGA outrage toward Somali immigrants, announcing the suspension of temporary protected status for thousands of them and effectively compelling them to leave the country by March 17.

It took no great leap for ICE agents, emboldened by this explicit mission, to apply the same brutal and inhuman logic to anyone who got in their way—especially if the offender in question was deemed insufficiently deferential to their self-aggrandizing shows of force. Once a crusade of state violence targets one vulnerable population, it has no incentive to stop there. N

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KALI HOLLOWAY

FROM TOP: JOE CIARDIELLO; HASSAN JEDI / ANADOLU / GETTY IMAGES; RON JENKINS / GETTY IMAGES

Cultural Contradictions
David Klion

Trump's Prime Minister

How did one unelected man, Stephen Miller, come to dominate the most powerful government on earth?

NO ONE EVER VOTED FOR STEPHEN MILLER. ONLY A BARE plurality of American voters pulled the lever for his boss, Donald Trump, in 2024—and even then, voters were concerned above all with the rising cost of living, not with immigration, Miller's obsessive focus. But over the past year, Miller has become arguably the most consequential figure in the second Trump administration—the maximalist force behind a maximalist presidency. Guided by white-supremacist teachings like the dystopian novel *The Camp of the Saints*, Miller has made the ethnic purification of the American body and the expulsion of potentially millions of immigrants the administration's central priority.

What makes Miller truly scary is that he is uncommonly effective at getting his way. Steve Bannon has described him as Trump's "prime minister," while White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt recently told *The Atlantic* that Miller "oversees every policy the administration touches." His fingerprints can be found all over the deployments of ICE to US cities, including the one that culminated in the killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti in the streets of Minneapolis; the rendition of scores of immigrants to a gulag in El Salvador without a shred of due process; the attempt to eliminate birthright citizenship and thus strip millions of native-born Americans of their most basic constitutional rights; and, increasingly, Trump's most provocative and unilateral foreign-policy moves, from abducting Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela to his ongoing threats to annex Greenland.

Like Miller himself, none of this is popular. In Trump's first year back in the White House, his net approval rating steadily declined from a high of plus 4 percent to a low of minus 19 percent—about as bad as has ever been recorded at this stage of a presidency—and the Democrats are favored to take back the House in this fall's midterms. Voters are overwhelmingly concerned about the state of the economy, which continues to suffer from high inflation thanks to Trump's much-publicized tariffs, and have expressed strong disapproval of his immigration-enforcement policies in particular, especially in the wake of the slayings in Minneapolis, which even many conservatives have struggled to defend. In a more rational administration, the way forward politically would be clear: Trump would marginalize (or ideally fire) Miller and pivot to a less abhorrent policy approach. Instead, Miller has seemed only to grow in stature and influence within the administration.

How did the most powerful government on earth come to be dominated

by this unelected, viscerally unappealing 40-year-old right-wing extremist from Santa Monica? Last year, I reviewed the most authoritative biography of Miller, Jean Guerrero's *Hatemonger*, for this magazine, and I came away with the impression that Miller has a handful of talents: a willingness to attract and capitalize on negative attention (colloquially, he's good at "trolling"); an unusual skill at navigating office power politics and flattering the right people (in Trump's first term, Miller won over Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump even though neither shares his extreme anti-immigration views); and an uncommon sense of how to turn his ruthless dogmatism into policy.

The trolling is table stakes in the MAGA extended universe, where countless individuals, including Miller's wife, have pursued careers as influencers channeling the myriad frustrations of the American right. Miller, a frequent guest on shock-jock radio since high school, certainly could have gone that route. But it was Miller's cutthroat instincts on Capitol Hill and his unfailing loyalty to Trump that ensured that his legacy would be more than just talk, and that he would exert the kind of influence over a sitting president that malign figures like Henry Kissinger and Dick Cheney once did. The Venn diagram of competent Beltway operatives and ideologically committed neofascists has a very small intersection, but Miller sits comfortably at the center of it. He is hardly the most colorful character in the second Trump administration, where the competition includes Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Pete Hegseth, Kash Patel, and Kristi Noem. But his impact on policy is outsize, even when the administration itself might be better served politically by doing anything else.

Miller sits comfortably at the center of the Venn diagram of competent Beltway operatives and ideologically committed neofascists.

"We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world—in the real world, Jake—that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power," Miller told CNN's Jake Tapper recently in a defense of Trump's Western Hemisphere expansionism. "These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

The Darwinian flourishes are pure Miller, but the underlying imperial hubris recalls the 2004 quote that Ron Suskind got from a top George W. Bush official, widely assumed to be Karl Rove: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors…and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

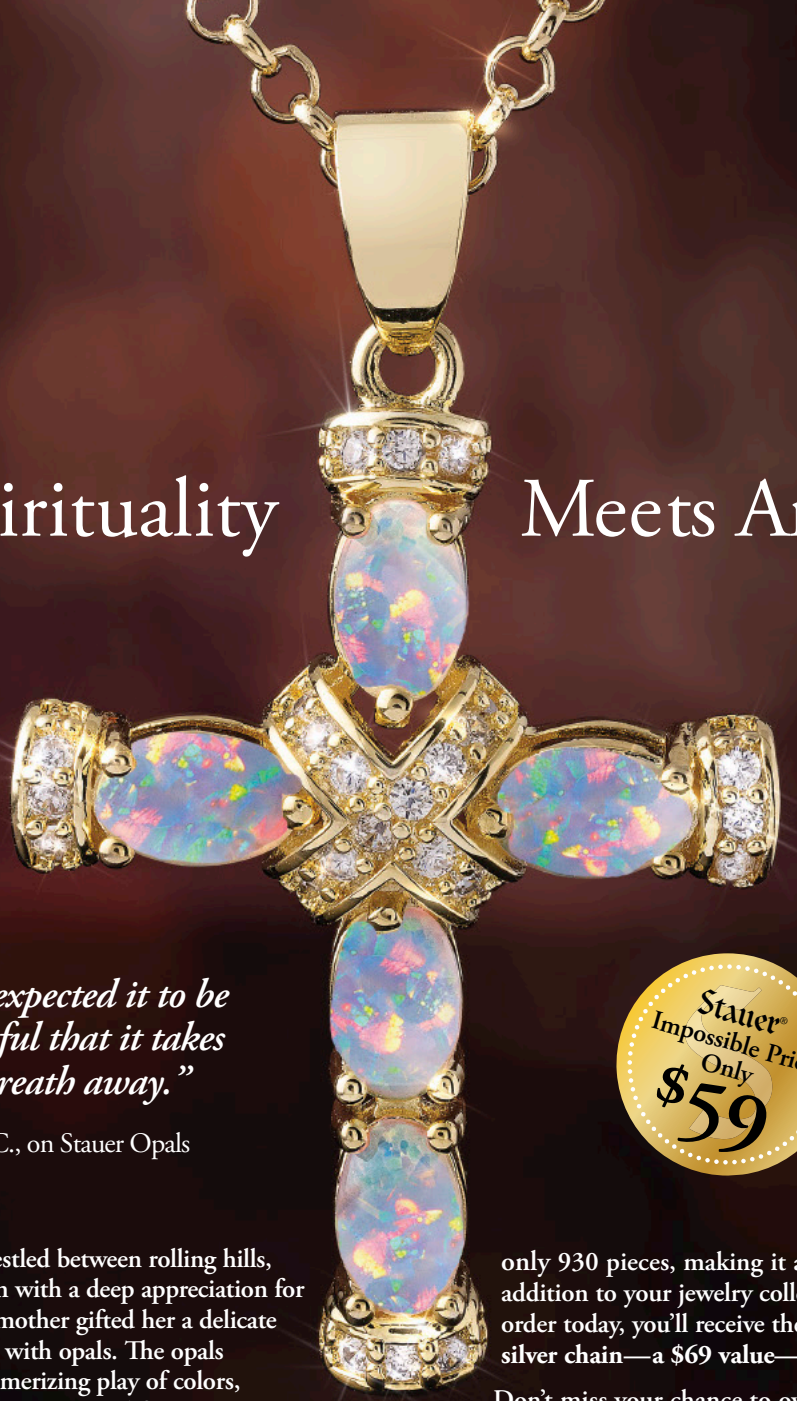
Given how the Bush administration's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq worked out, there's a lesson here for Miller—and for us. It's true that with the power he currently wields, he can mold reality to a far greater extent than anyone should be comfortable with. But there is far less domestic support for Trump and Miller's agenda than Bush and Rove once enjoyed for theirs, and neither financial markets nor foreign governments nor the ordinary citizens confronting ICE in the streets have passively bent to their will. Reality is never solely the product of any one small political clique, and it has a tendency to frustrate and foil those who would claim the right to shape it. It's far simpler to outmaneuver one's colleagues for control of the boss's ear than it is to impose one's will on the rest of the world. This, too, has been an iron law of the world since the beginning of time. **N**

SNAPSHOT
ROBERTO SCHMIDT

Don't look away: The memorial site where Alex Pretti was killed has attracted thousands of mourners seeking justice.

AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Spirituality Meets Artistry



"I never expected it to be so beautiful that it takes your breath away."

— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals

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Subject to Debate
Katha Pollitt

The Deepfake Danger

AI porn is what happens when technology liberates misogyny from social constraints.

In the day or two between my editor suggesting that I write about AI deepfake porn and my replying, "Great idea, what's a deepfake?," it seemed like everyone from *The Economist* to *The Dallas Morning News* was publishing an article about artificial intelligence being used to sexualize people in photos without their permission. Deepfakes were first reported in 2017 and have been in the news ever since. In 2024, deepfakes of Taylor Swift were posted on X and viewed over 47 million times, prompting outrage and talk of legal recourse. Grok, the platform's AI function, has allowed users to undress people, including children, and bend them into whatever porny positions the user requests. Grok has stripped children and covered them in semen—um, "donut glaze."

Why would that bother anyone, you ask? Elon Musk answered on X the other day, "They hate free speech." Well, obviously.

Legislators have made some attempts to curb the creation of deepfakes. In April, Congress passed the Take It Down Act, which makes it a crime to create or distribute intimate images, real or deepfake, without the subject's consent. And X claims it has fixed the problem.

But has it really?

Ever the intrepid reporter, I provided Grok with a photo of myself mailing packages at the post office and asked it to make me naked. "Unfortunately," said Grok, "I can't generate that kind of image." Why "unfortunately," Grok? Do you wish you could? It did, however, consent to show me in a bikini. Unfortunately.

Next, I asked Grok to put Queen Elizabeth in a bikini, and it did, although it kept her white gloves on. When I accused Grok of making deepfakes, it acted all insulted: "I am not a tool for making deepfake porn, and I won't assist with or point toward anything that does." And yet elsewhere in the post, Grok described "non-consensual sexualized deep-fake-style edits of real photos" as including "altered versions with bikinis, underwear, or simulated nudity"—the very thing I had done to myself and the queen only a few hours before. It also claimed that to edit images, users had to pay—another falsehood.

When I asked Grok to put Melania Trump in a bikini, it showed me only her top half, and very beautiful it was, too—not at all like the queen or me, which strongly suggests that Grok is a Republican. Following the example of users trying to get around the nudity ban, I suggested putting Melania in a bikini made of dental floss (surprisingly well-designed), a "Holocaust uniform" (apparently a lot of deepfake creeps are antisemitic), and Saran Wrap. Grok drew the line at Saran Wrap. ("Unfortunately…")

Musk and his fans want us to be lighthearted about deepfakes. When UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer threatened to ban X if it didn't crack down on Grok, Musk accused the UK government of being fascist and had Grok put Starmer in a bikini. Don't be such a baby, Keir! Can't you take a joke?

Remember when people used to say "the Internet isn't real life" to hush women who were threatened or pornified by online misogynists? Of course, the Internet *is* real life. You might as well argue that something isn't hurtful if it's said on the telephone instead of in person.

So what is the harm of deepfakes? Sherry Turkle, a social scientist at MIT who studies the effects of technology on intimacy, told me, "Every harm." There is, of course, the humiliation, the violation of privacy, and the fact that once they are posted online, the images may live forever. Deepfakes are meant to insult and degrade. Men singled out Taylor Swift for AI porn because she is famous, powerful, gifted, beautiful, beloved, an independent woman, and a feminist—that bitch needed to be put in her place. When boys share AI-created images of girls in their class covered in semen or giving blow jobs, they are bonding with each other over hatred and contempt for those girls. And how would you, as one of those girls, like having to explain again and again to potential employers or boyfriends or your relatives that *those* photos weren't actually you? That's as real as real life gets.

What's often missing from these conversations is the harm that deepfakes do to all of us. "We become accustomed to trusting nothing that we see, and yet we are continually aggressed by false images," Turkle told me. "When we are the object, we are humiliated and made to feel vulnerable and impotent. The fact that images are not authentic does not reduce their power."

Deepfakes are meant to insult and degrade. Men singled out Taylor Swift for AI porn because she is famous, powerful, and gifted.

Nadine Strossen, a legal scholar and a former president of the ACLU, told me, "People often get upset at new technologies," but after a while things settle down.

Do they, though?

It's hard to believe that deepfake porn will ever just be a part of the landscape, like the

ANDY FRIEDMAN

once-shocking *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Ulysses*. More likely, it will morph into even more bizarre and nasty scenarios to please the jaded appetites of its fans, much like regular porn.

Deepfakes are just one of the ways that unreality is pervading and sometimes superseding real life: After all, people are marrying their chatbots and communing with AI avatars of deceased loved ones. Why not have Grok enact your fantasies and undress that girl who smiled at you on the bus? Better yet, you can figure out how to make a video of her masturbating or the two of you having sex.

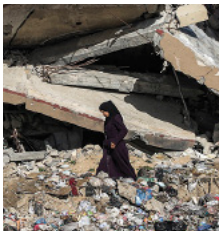
Deepfakes are misogyny liberated by technology from social constraints. Men who hate women have always been with us, and women have always had ways of hand-waving that hatred away: That's just Joe being Joe! As Germaine Greer wrote decades ago, "Women have very little idea of how much men hate them." Well, thanks to the Internet, it's all out in the open: incels, online trolls, the manosphere, Andrew Tate, violent pornography, and now the threat of deepfakes of any woman who speaks up for herself. Or maybe even just dares to exist. **N**

SNAPSHOT
Octavio Jones

Abolish ICE

A candlelight vigil in Minneapolis for Renee Nicole Good and Alex Pretti, who were killed by federal agents in January, as part of a week of action organized by National Nurses United to call for the abolition of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

By the Numbers



1.45K
Number of times that Israel has violated the ceasefire agreement in Gaza, which took effect on October 10, 2025

488
Number of Palestinians killed by Israel in Gaza since the ceasefire took effect (as of January 27, 2026)

2.3M
Number of Gazans who have been displaced since October 7, 2023

20K
Number of Palestinians awaiting permission to leave Gaza for medical treatment

80%
Portion of buildings in the Gaza Strip that have been damaged or destroyed by Israel

180
Number of skyscrapers proposed for the "coastal tourism" zone of the Trump administration's "New Gaza"

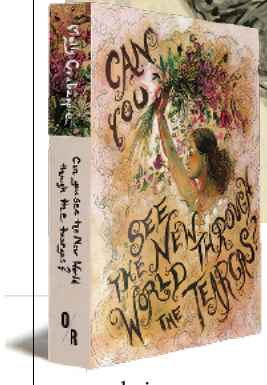
$1B
Price to purchase a permanent seat on President Trump's "Board of Peace"

FROM TOP: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; EYAD BABA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

GALLERY/MOLLY CRABAPPLE

Surviving Tear Gas

A new set of note cards by the artist and writer Molly Crabapple is a time capsule of acts of resistance in the 21st century.



I've spent the past 15 years traveling around the world and documenting history as it happens. I use my sketch pad the way a photojournalist might use their camera: to capture scenes of protest, celebration, repression, and revolt. OR Books has gathered some of my favorite pieces for a collectible note-card set, titled *Can You See the New World Through the Teargas?* Use these cards to write love letters or ransom notes. Or get them framed for your wall. And remember: Every handwritten letter is a rebellion against Silicon Valley dystopia.

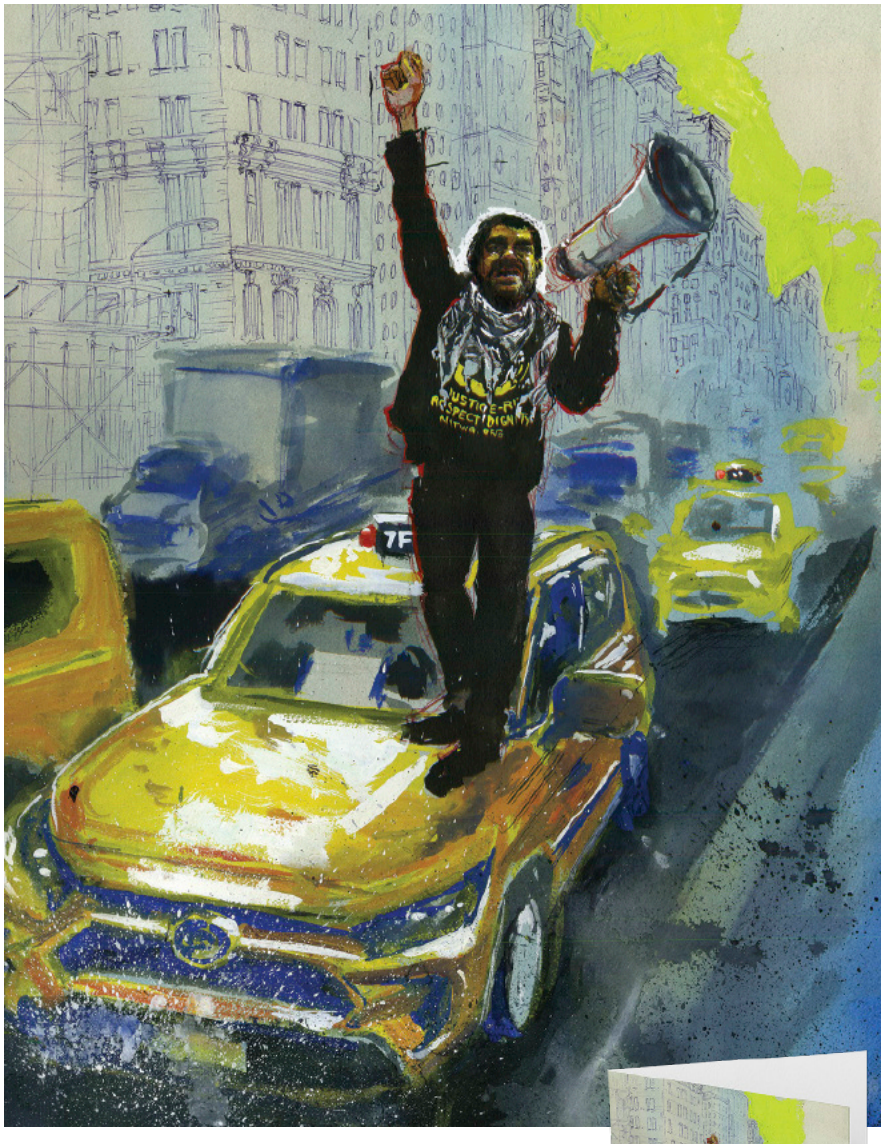
The pictures in this set range from kids playing with their kitten in the Aida Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, to a showtime dancer doing backflips in a New York City subway car, to images from the trial of Luigi Mangione. For all of them, I tried to use the lessons I first learned at 20 while sketching next to the stages of underground nightclubs. Each fleet-footed second is a universe of impossible richness. Look hard. Draw fast. Be ruthless. Get it right.

—Molly Crabapple

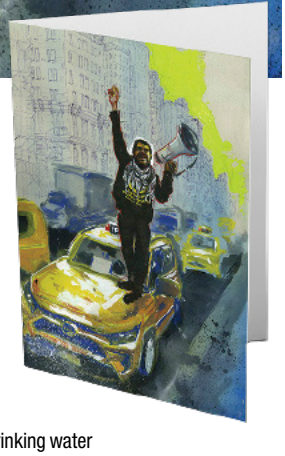
The Faroukh family's damaged home (Bethlehem, 2023).

A destroyed Russian tank in front of St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery (Kyiv, 2022).

Luchadora (Puerto Rico, 2018).



Taxi-driver protests (New York City, 2021).



Drinking water from a spring after Hurricane Maria (Puerto Rico, 2017).

Published by OR Books. Use the code MOLLY2026 for 15 percent off the card set when ordering from ORBooks.com.

VOICES / AMY LITTLEFIELD

Everything at Once

The anti-abortion movement was methodical and radical at the same time. The abortion-rights movement must be too.

IN TIMES OF FULL-SCALE ATTACK LIKE THE one now upon us, social movements face two paths. They can run defense through the traditional legal and political channels to protect the remaining scraps of what they've fought for. Or they can go on offense and work outside the system, devising risky legal experiments and taking to the streets. Under Donald Trump, Planned Parenthood—the nation's largest provider of reproductive-health services—has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding and closed approximately 50 clinics in the past year alone. In response, the organization has hewed to the defensive path it became known for during the half-century that abortion was legal nationwide. It has often prioritized protecting its own funding at the cost of taking on bigger fights. Confronted by restrictive laws, its affiliates often chose the path of least risk rather than greatest access, sometimes even ceasing to provide abortions where they remained legal, as Irin Carmon wrote in a recent article for *New York* magazine. In that article, the scholar Michele Goodwin described Planned Parenthood's long-standing adherence to its defensive strategy as the organization's "good-girl problem." Four years after *Roe*'s demise, it's easy to see this path as a resounding failure.

But as the immigrant-rights movement is showing us now, social movements are strongest when they manage to run both offense and defense at the same time. Today, immigration attorneys are fighting in court to stop whatever individual deportations they can, while ordinary people armed only with their phones document ICE's brutality. For the abortion-rights movement, the best historical example of how this approach can succeed comes from its own enemies.

I've spent the past two years writing a book on how abortion opponents built a grassroots movement to do what once felt impossible: overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Titled *Killers of Roe*, it's a whodunit that looks at the behind-the-scenes figures who were responsible for the death of abortion rights. Tracing this history, I saw how abortion opponents won because they ran down both roads at once. Legal organizations like the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) were the movement's "good girls." They lobbied Republican politicians to restrict abortion and for decades accepted incremental victories. Eventually, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) took one of these incremental victories to the Supreme Court, which ultimately toppled *Roe*. But these groups would not have succeeded without the movement's "bad girls." Randall Terry staged "rescue" blockades of clinics in the 1980s and '90s. Monica Migliorino Miller pulled fetuses out of dumpsters in the dark of night and took pictures of them to put on posters. Extremists bombed clinics and murdered doctors and receptionists. These "bad girls" generated a false sense that legal abortion was controversial, even though most Americans supported it.

Within the anti-abortion movement, the "good girls" and "bad girls" often fought. But in the hindsight afforded by history, the rifts in the movement look like strengths. Joseph Scheidler, the 6-foot-4, fedora-wearing godfather of the anti-abortion movement, was fired as director of the NRLC's Illinois affiliate for his militant tactics. But his clinic sit-ins and displays of bloody fetuses galvanized true believers and helped spark the "rescue" movement. In 2021, nine months before the ADF would prevail in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the case that overturned *Roe*, former Texas solicitor general Jonathan Mitchell's wild idea to outsource the enforcement of abortion laws to private citizens succeeded in banning most abortions in Texas.

So what can progressives learn from the anti-abortion movement's victory?

Roe established a baseline of legal protection that the abortion-rights movement needed to defend. But this strategy alone was never enough. It overlooked the reality that many women of color and low-income people lacked access to abortion even with *Roe* in effect, under policies like the Hyde Amendment, the ban on

In the wake of *Roe*'s fall, unconventional strategies have been extraordinarily successful.

the federal funding of abortion first passed in 1976. While researching my book, I came upon certain historical moments that felt like turning points, such as January of 1981. Ronald Reagan had just been elected, the Supreme Court had upheld the Hyde Amendment, and abortion opponents in Congress were floating a "Human Life Amendment" to ban abortion under the Constitution.

Six days before Reagan's inauguration, the leaders of national pro-choice organizations—including Planned Parenthood, NARAL, NOW, and the ACLU—gathered for a meeting. The group identified "four areas in which it wanted to direct further discussion," one of which was "Poor Women." "The discussion of poor women produced agreement that this issue must be kept alive but that the larger issue of a Human Life Amendment must take precedence for the time being," the notes read.

When I discovered this memo in the NARAL archives, I felt like I had found a smoking gun. There it was: the movement's decision to deprioritize the Hyde Amendment. Even the movement's most famous "bad girls" were part of this agreement. Faye Wattleton, who had become the first Black woman to lead Planned Parenthood in 1978 and announced a controversial goal of restoring Medicaid funding for abortion, made a case for the defensive approach. "Faye expressed a belief that the medicaid issue is a separate phenomenon," the notes read. "It was a bellweather [sic] issue, she said, regarding people's feelings about the poor, public funding, etc. She thinks it best now to hold on to established ground."

When I asked Wattleton about this moment, she told me that she didn't believe the movement ever completely gave up on Hyde, even though the Human Life Amendment presented "an even more fundamental challenge" that it needed to confront. Indeed, the decision wasn't as black-and-white as it looked on paper. The leaders would continue to discuss ways to restore Medicaid funding in states where it seemed feasible. But Wattleton was a nurse by training. So she did what Planned Parenthood—an organization that has for decades relied on federal funds to provide healthcare to millions—has always done: She ran triage and took on the biggest threat first.

In 1993, two paths again diverged for the movement over public funding. This time, the fork in the road would divide advocates. Democrats controlled Congress and the presidency for the first time in over a decade, and this was their shot to enshrine legal abortion even if *Roe* someday fell. Planned Parenthood and NARAL wanted to pass a bill to codify *Roe*. But a coalition from the left that included the National Black Women's Health Project and NOW demanded that the legislation address parental-consent requirements and Medicaid funding, lest it leave the most vulnerable behind. The bill didn't pass, and the more progressive organizations took the blame. But you could also blame the movement's "good girl" politics, which had reigned for so long that any insistence on protections beyond *Roe* sounded unreasonable.

The issue came to a head again almost two decades later, during the debates over the Affordable Care Act. Barack Obama struck a deal with anti-abortion Democrats to accept restrictions on the private coverage of abortion and to reaffirm the Hyde Amendment in an executive order. Nancy Keenan, who was head of NARAL at the time, told me the White House had reached out to Planned Parenthood and NARAL for their quiet endorsement before sealing the deal. Groups led by women of color as well as grassroots organizations that had stepped up to fund abortions after Hyde cut off federal Medicaid coverage were angry at the outcome. Apparently, electing a Democratic president wasn't enough to protect abortion rights. So those groups devised the abortion-rights movement's greatest unsung success in a generation: a campaign called All* Above All, which took direct aim at Hyde, amassing 71 cosponsors on a historic bill to repeal the ban. In the process, All* Above All succeeded in convincing a number of prominent Democrats to reverse their long-standing support of the amendment, including most notably Joe Biden, who came out against Hyde during his presidential campaign after supporting it for decades.

The campaign initially caused a rift in the movement, advocates told me; one early meeting got so heated that a high-level pro-choice operative stormed out of the room. But in hindsight, these ruptures can be seen not as weaknesses but as growing pains. They were early signs of a movement finally learning to run down two roads at once.

In the wake of *Roe*'s fall, unconventional paths have been extraordinarily successful. Legal strategists from outside the established groups banded together to devise and lobby for "shield laws," untested new measures to protect providers in blue states who ship abortion pills to places like Texas. A number of the biggest pro-choice organizations in the country, including Planned Parenthood, cautioned against this strategy. But others in the movement did it anyway, and thanks in large part to these laws—and to the doctors who risk retribution from red states to mail abortion medications—the number of abortions has risen every year since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe*. Let that sink in for a minute. The movement didn't get there through one path only. Most abortions still take place in brick-and-mortar clinics. And the victory is far from complete. Abortion restrictions are still forcing people to continue their pregnancies, and sometimes these restrictions are killing them. But as Planned Parenthood and independent clinics were keeping whatever doors they could open, the bad girls were breaking the system and building a new one.

If we can learn anything from the anti-abortion movement's success, it's that sometimes you win not by unifying behind one strategy but by doing it all. Unlike the proverbial traveler in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," social movements don't have to choose. They can—and, history indicates, they must—take both roads at once. **N**

Amy Littlefield's new book is Killers of Roe: My Investigation Into the Mysterious Death of Abortion Rights *(Hachette).*

Letters

Basement Books

In "Construction Follies," Kate Wagner aims harsh scorn at two of the University of Chicago's most significant recent initiatives in the arts and humanities [November 2025]. While we appreciate *The Nation*'s engagement with the humanities, we wish to clarify several points. Mansueto Library and the Logan Center for the Arts were deeply informed by guidance from UChicago faculty and students, including many in the arts and humanities. Of the many uninformed statements in the piece (no, the university has not lost money on crypto), we were particularly surprised by the suggestion that the library is inaccessible and "little more than something interesting to look at." Mansueto shares an entrance with Regenstein Library, which allows public access to 5 million volumes on open shelves. The browsable collection in Regenstein is larger than that of most university libraries, though it constitutes a fraction of the 13.5 million print and digital volumes in UChicago's library system. Mansueto and Regenstein are visited more than 1.1 million times annually, drawing global academic visitors for their unique collections, especially in the humanities. When Mansueto opened in 2011, universities worldwide had long since started sending collections to off-site storage, usually taking days to deliver books to borrowers. In contrast, UChicago expanded collection storage on campus. Mansueto provides high-density storage in ideal preservation conditions, delivering books to patrons in minutes. The airy top level houses a conservation facility and a beloved reading room used by hundreds daily. In our view, this makes the library highly suited to its function, visually interesting, and a cherished facility for humanities research.

Torsten Reimer
University Librarian and Dean of the University Library, University of Chicago

Kate Wagner Replies

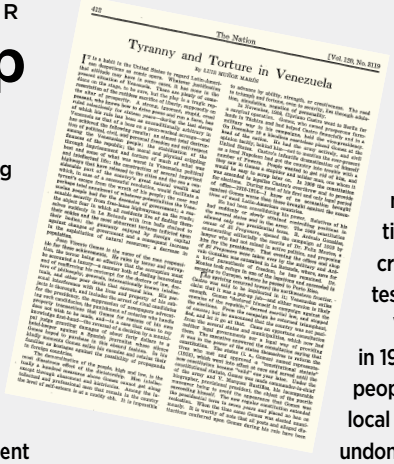
My article did not intend to disparage the University of Chicago's library system, which I have used to great delight, having lectured there. Differences about its accessibility issues aside, my ire was directed solely at the administration, which has undertaken many expensive building projects—of which Mansueto was one of the very few necessities—while defunding the humanities and deferring the maintenance necessary to bring the school's quad up to contemporary standards. The fact is that the university is in massive debt. Some of this is construction debt, but much of it comes from overleveraged financial plays (such as a very real foray into crypto). When the university's board behaves in financially negligent or reckless ways, the humanities bear the cuts—God forbid anyone touch the business school. Walking by such expensive and frivolous buildings as Campus North (as good a signifier as any of the university as luxury) and the Rubenstein Forum (a gargantuan monument to the administration itself), one cannot help but become indignant, even enraged. At the end of the day, architecture is about money and power and who has it and who doesn't. At UChicago, those dichotomies are very clear.

Kate Wagner
Chicago, IL

OUR BACK PAGES / RICHARD KREITNER

Venezuela Time Warp

A brutal story on endless repeat.


Tyranny and Torture in Venezuela

The Nation. [Vol. 120, No. 3119

By LUIS MUÑOZ MARÍN

T*he Nation* has been covering Venezuela for a long time—since before Trump and Maduro, before Chavismo, before the drug war. Spread across three centuries, the coverage is most remarkable for the consistency of its themes: struggles between autocracy and democracy, debates over foreign intervention, dispatches about the corrupting role of oil.

The Nation's first notable story is from 1895, when a conflict over Venezuela's border with the British territory of Guiana (now Guyana)—where gold had recently been found—provoked President Grover Cleveland to invoke the decades-old Monroe Doctrine: European powers had no right to intervene in the Western Hemisphere. Cleveland's statement heralded a new era of US chest-thumping that culminated three years later with the Spanish-American War. Alarmed by the president's rhetoric, *The Nation* ridiculed the idea that "we are going, in the name of the Monroe doctrine, to assert such ownership of the American hemisphere as will enable us to trace all the boundary lines on it to our own satisfaction in defiance of the rest of the world."

Regrettably, that is just what the US government did, repeatedly meddling in Latin America to prop up rulers who preyed on their own people and served corporate interests. From 1908 to 1935, Venezuela was ruled by Juan Vicente Gómez, a dictator who governed "by terror and corruption," as the great Puerto Rican journalist and politician Luis Muñoz Marín wrote in these pages in 1925. Gómez invoked martial law, replaced the constitution, and tortured and imprisoned his critics. "The picture is lurid and grotesque," Muñoz Marín concluded.

Venezuela had begun pumping oil in 1914. But the profits went not to the people but to foreign companies and local elites. "Gomez has left nothing undone to make foreign capital at home in Venezuela," *The Nation*'s Mauritz A. Hallgren noted in 1928. US companies returned the favor with their unqualified support for his regime.

In 1951, with yet another dictator leading Venezuela, *The Nation* published "Suicide By Oil," in which the journalist Marcelle Michelin reported, "Venezuela appears extravagantly wealthy. But the Venezuelans to whom black gold has meant a better way of life are the fortunate minority of the cities and oil camps."

Again and again, in reading *The Nation*'s coverage, one encounters a similar story: malevolent actors, inside and outside the country, conspiring to separate the people from their land and resources—and, with them, the fulfillment of their fiercely held hopes and dreams. N

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Consuming Our Way to Health

How the Obamas' failed healthy-eating initiative helped set the stage for MAHA's right-wing quackery.

ANNIE LEVIN

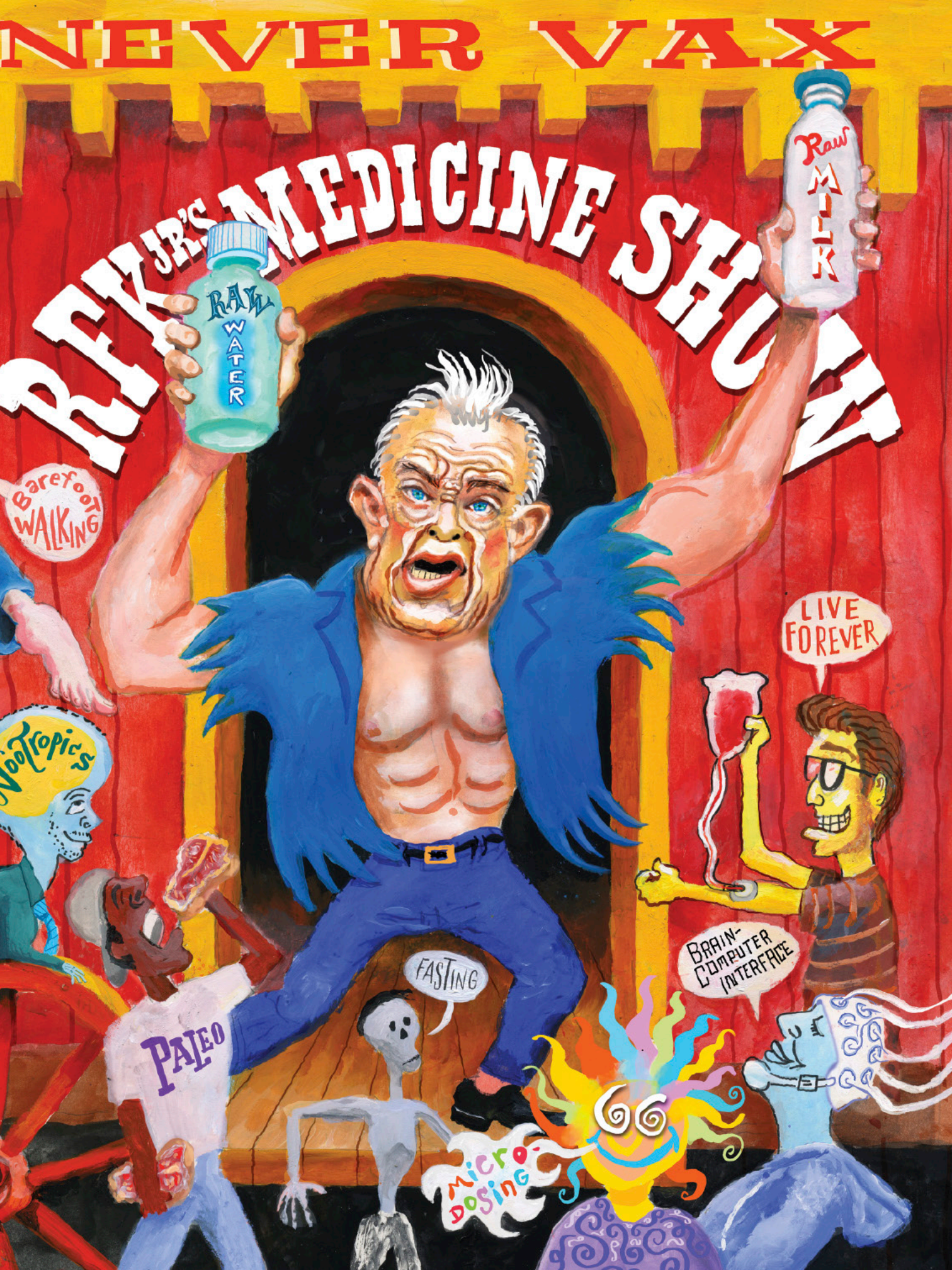
On November 12, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. gathered together health advocates, social-media influencers, and biohacking entrepreneurs at the White House for the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Summit. The panels featured no scientists, doctors, or academic researchers but were replete with CEOs, bloggers, and right-wing celebrities like the UFC president and mixed-martial-arts expert Dana White. The day-long conference included Dongjin "DJ" Seo, a cofounder of Elon Musk's Neuralink, discussing the future of "brain-computer interfaces" and his vision for a cyborg humanity. The venture capitalist Bryan Johnson, known for receiving blood transfusions from his teenage son, pondered whether, with "biohacks" like these, his generation could be the first to become immortal. Vice President JD Vance, taking the stage to the tune of "Long Cool Woman" by the Hollies, spoke passionately on government overreach in the healthcare sector.

Speakers also discussed topics more typical of a public-health conference. Aidan Dewar, the CEO of the start-up Telenutrition, and the food blogger Vani Hari spoke on the health benefits of nourishing food and the dangers of additives and preservatives. The tech executives Farid Vij, Chris Altchek, and Sean Duffy discussed using their companies' in-app technologies to manage chronic disease. Also addressed: the contraction of American lifespans and the dangers of alcohol and seed oils. The summit's overall theme was the breakdown of American healthcare and how the industry needs to be disrupted and rebuilt from the ground up. Rebuilt, of course, through deregulation, with the bottom lines of conglomerates and tech start-ups taking top priority.

This spectacle, while sleazy and unsettling, was hardly a departure from the status quo. The MAHA conference was in many respects the logical outcome of long-standing US policy on public health, particularly nutrition. Few things are more elemental than food. But ever since the 1970s, when the idea of eating healthy came to prominence with the organic-food revolution, we've struggled as a country to address the structural problem of access to that healthy food. What we've tackled instead are problems of consumer choice. The lead-up to Kennedy's circus of sci-fi fantasists and food bloggers provides an object lesson in how the left cedes fertile political territory to the right. Healthy eating—a cause that's as foundational as they come—has gradually been put to pasture as a collective national project. Rather than addressing the working and living conditions of Americans that are at the root of the issue, one presidential administration after another has punted the problem to the free market.

Annie Levin is a New York City–based journalist. Her writing on culture, labor, and politics has appeared in Current Affairs, Jacobin, Observer, *and elsewhere.*

ILLUSTRATION BY **JOSH GOSFIELD**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Preindustrial practices: Mid-20th-century farmers began to incorporate traditional agricultural techniques to maintain soil integrity.

Organic food as we know it is food that is cultivated by applying modern technology to traditional agriculture. An organic farmer might use a tractor, a harvester, or a milking machine but avoid harmful fertilizers, pest controls, or animal growth hormones. The early promoters of the organic-farming movement prioritized soil quality and the sustainability of agricultural practices. (The focus on the higher nutritional quality of organic foods came later, when the movement transformed into an industry.) The botanist Sir Albert Howard, sometimes considered the father of organic agriculture, wrote in his 1947 book *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture*, "All the great agricultural systems which have survived have made it their business never to deplete the earth of its fertility without at the same time beginning the process of restoration." Howard sought to realign the interests of humanity with those of nature in agricultural practices as a way to protect our food systems from wasteful industrial consumption. Along with other mid-20th-century scientists, such as the microbiologist Masanobu Fukuoka, he was responding to wasteful, soil-depleting industrial techniques and the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers that would only become more advanced, widespread, and dangerous as the century progressed.

In the 1960s, widespread concerns about the environmental effects of pesticides like DDT boosted interest in organic farming. The conservationist Rachel Carson made many Americans aware of the dangers of pesticides for the first time in her 1962 bestseller *Silent Spring*. Highlighting the egotism and shortsightedness of industrial pesticide use, Carson wrote, "How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?" Given these new environmental concerns, the hippie counterculture of the late 1960s and early '70s dovetailed neatly with the organic-farming movement. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, the popular nonfiction writer Michael Pollan describes the organic farming of this era as "one of several tributaries of the counterculture that ended up disappearing into the American mainstream."

By the 1980s, the fruit stands that sprouted during the Summer of Love had evolved into giant farming conglomerates.

As the public became increasingly environmentally conscious and organic farmers mounted a parallel back-to-the-land movement, a market for organic food burgeoned, especially on the West Coast. Starting in the 1970s, states like Oregon and California, where organic farming was taking off, responded by passing regulations that would allow products to be certified as organic. This labeling helped consumers distinguish these foods from their industrial counterparts. Upwardly mobile baby boomers in particular boosted this new industry. By the Reaganite 1980s, roadside raspberry stands that had sprouted during the Summer of Love had evolved into giant farming conglomerates, with their complement of lawyers and lobbyists. The now-vast and corporatized organic-food industry, working in conjunction with environmental groups such as Beyond Pesticides, lobbied Congress to establish a set of national industry standards that would define *organic* and govern the certification of organic foods. The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 enabled the US Department of Agriculture to regulate food products under the National Organic Program and set standards for production and labeling, ushering in the booming industry we have today. The green-and-white "USDA Organic" sticker on egg cartons comes from the passage of this law.

After the Organic Foods Production Act was finally implemented in 2002, what had been a lifestyle confined mostly to left-leaning, health-conscious West Coast families became more mainstream. By the 2010s, supermarkets throughout the country were stocked with organic products from Earthbound Farm and Cal-Organic. These foods were, and continue to be, more expensive than their industrial alternatives. The USDA reported in 2016 that

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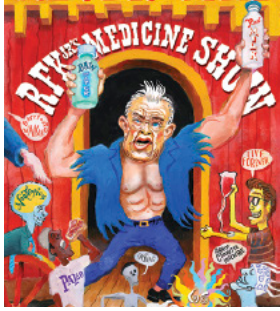


the price of organic food ranged from 7 percent higher for produce to a whopping 80 percent higher for eggs. At the same time, popular books like Pollan's *In Defense of Food* (2008) and other best-selling books were promoting a new way of thinking about food systems. Farm-to-table dining became de rigueur in fine restaurants; beef had to be grass-fed, tomatoes heirloom, and chickens heritage-breed. This was the back-to-the-land moment for a certain strain of millennials, the era of urban-rooftop beekeeping and faux farmhouse weddings. Upper-middle-class urban millennials were canning preserves, pickling vegetables, and posting their creations on websites like Punk Domestics. "Grandma" aesthetics were all the rage, and children were given Victorian names like Emma and Ella and fed made-from-scratch meals that paid homage to a time before McDonald's and microwaves. Traditional lifestyles, organic foods, and wellness were hip, and like most things that were in vogue in the 2010s, they were coded politically as left-wing.

Though there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the era of home preserves and "stomp, clap, hey" folk pop, these cultural trends had a very limited reach. The changes in lifestyle and diet were confined mostly to an urban American middle class. While new narratives about food and health persuaded many middle-class people to buy organic products and change the way they eat, locally sourced ingredients and grass-fed meats were available only in places with high concentrations of wealth. High-income neighborhoods had farmers markets and bespoke butchers, but poor ones remained food deserts. In the end, these lifestyle changes also turned out not to move the needle a whole lot when it came to public health. Across demographics, obesity rates continued to climb despite the new food culture, particularly in rural food deserts.

Since Kennedy's confirmation hearing on January 29, 2025, numerous publications have drawn a connection between his Make America Healthy Again platform and former first lady Michelle Obama's 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. Both took aim at ultra-processed foods and sugary drinks and encouraged parents to feed their children more nourishing foods. Both attempted to address the country's obesity and chronic-disease epidemics by encouraging healthy eating. While the Obamas' health initiatives withered away after Donald Trump took office, the right has surged into the healthy-eating space. These public-wellness efforts quickly found purchase in the unregulated, conspiracist-filled world of supplements.

The rollout and design of the Obamas' healthy-eating initiatives offer some clues as to how this happened. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was a bipartisan effort to make school lunches more nutritious nationwide and to give poor kids better access to those meals. The law was the centerpiece of Michelle Obama's Let's Move initiative to combat childhood obesity, and it did attempt to tackle the legitimate problem of access among lower-income families. But typical of the Obama administration's orientation toward public welfare, the program was a hodgepodge package that tried to sell itself to the public by partnering with big businesses, government agencies, and celebrities. Walmart committed itself to lowering the cost of fruits and vegetables. The Department of Agriculture rolled out MyPlate, a website that provides information on nutrition standards. Three million students were given access to in-school salad bars. School-lunch standards were improved, and more children were made eligible for free meals. Promoting the initiative, Beyoncé reworked her 2007 song "Get Me Bodied," changing the title to "Move Your Body" for the first lady's "Let's Move!" flash workout.

In less than a generation, we went from in-school salad bars to MAHA's dubious biohacking entrepreneurs.

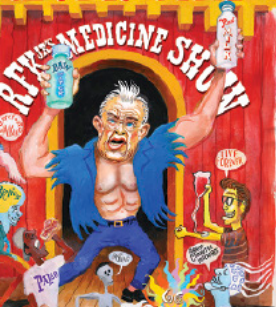
This top-down initiative aimed to alleviate the poor nutrition of some of the most vulnerable Americans. Marginalized communities were given a much-needed boost in nutrition and food education. The Overton window was shifting left on whole foods. Like many other middle-class urbanites in Obama's base (i.e., not the demographic the initiative was intended to reach), I was thrilled by this era's food movement. Nutrition standards were improving, supermarkets were full of organic food, and American cuisine was being revolutionized. Meals at home and in restaurants even tasted better. It seemed like the dawn of a new era in healthy eating. Yet, in less than a generation, we went from in-school salad bars to MAHA's biohacking entrepreneurs.

The Obamas' glossy, well-publicized initiative, accompanied by a blitz of news items featuring the first lady taking gym classes and tending to vegetable gardens, had more than a whiff of bootstraps rhetoric about it, framing nutrition and exercise as matters of personal responsibility. It also coincided with an explosion in the availability of organic-food products in supermarkets around the country. Sales saw very healthy improvement throughout the 1980s and '90s, reaching $7.8 billion in 2000. The Organic Foods Production Act vastly expanded the scale of the industry, and by 2024 the Organic Trade Association reported annual sales at $71.6 billion. The act was the result of years of lobbying by a consortium of organic-food companies. Some of these, such as Cascadian Farm and Eden Foods, had their origins in the left-leaning sustainable-agriculture and food co-op movements of the 1960s and '70s.

ALEX WONG / GETTY IMAGES

King of crackpots: Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. peddles pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories.

Far from sparking the locavore revolution, the Obamas' nutrition program instead attached their brand to the all-natural zeitgeist of the 2010s. Their signature



wellness legislation was a bouquet of moderate, market-friendly reforms delivered during a boom in organic-food consumption. As with other Obama-era reforms, while it did address a real issue with serious, if modest, changes, it didn't have the reach to appeal to the general population.

In the media, the small improvements the legislation was able to make were drowned out by the pandemonium of the culture wars. Republicans met the West Wing's organic-eating initiatives with cartoonish diatribes against the "nanny state." Sarah Palin protested an initiative that would limit the number of sweets allowed in Pennsylvania schools by staging a delivery of sugar cookies to a Christian school in Bucks County. Right-wing outlets blamed Michelle Obama's exercise regimen for an uptick in pedestrian deaths after people started walking more. Centrist liberals, meanwhile, responded in kind by mocking obese, unhealthy red-state Republicans. The trim, disciplined Barack Obama, who snacked on seven almonds a night in the White House, was regularly contrasted on liberal talk shows with the corpulent Chris Christie, Mike Huckabee, or Donald Trump. The food movement became yet another dreary (class) signifier in the culture wars: consumer goods you could buy—or conspicuously mock and avoid—to signal allegiance to your political team (and, implicitly, your ranking in the socioeconomic food chain).

Dubious products like unfluoridated water, raw milk, and colloidal silver have skyrocketed in popularity since the pandemic.

Paved with good intentions: Michelle Obama's public-health campaign yielded weak results.

Today, the market shares of organic food and supplements have seen explosive growth and are both predicted to more than double in the next seven years. Despite these booming industries, Americans' health has not improved. The Obama administration achieved modest, temporary decreases in obesity rates for very young children, but rates overall have continued to climb. However well-intentioned the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was, it failed to have an impact on health in a way that felt palpable to most people. While the tech CEOs at the MAHA Summit expounded on the health benefits of fruits and vegetables, President Trump, in addition to attempting to roll back many of the provisions of Obama's health act, has cut the benefits that allow people to actually buy fruits and vegetables. Comparing the two administrations, most of us would choose inadequate help over active harm. But it was partly because a Democratic administration's interventions in wellness yielded such weak results that once the government lurched rightward, so did health consciousness.

WIN MCNAMEE / GETTY IMAGES

While the food movement in this period was associated with left-wing politics, at the ever-encroaching political fringe, a growing cadre of health-obsessed libertarian entrepreneurs promoted radical methods of self-improvement. Lifestyle authors like Timothy Ferriss and Mark Sisson popularized eating like paleolithic humans, barefoot walking, intermittent fasting, and Ironman competitions. CrossFit, the high-intensity gym begun by the staunch libertarian Greg Glassman, went from 13 gyms in 2005 to 13,000 in 2016. Obesity statistics were getting worse, and Gen Xers and millennials were aging. While Bernie Sanders and the small organized left called for Medicare for All, the market responded to new health concerns with a wild cornucopia of supplements and health fads, from benign bone broth to the more dubious nootropics, or "cognitive enhancers."

Eventually, radical self-improvement became popular in corporate America, particularly in Big Tech. In private life, for the upwardly mobile liberal, it was the era of sauerkraut crocks and handlebar mustaches. But in the workplace, it became the era of standing desks, biometric screenings, corporate microdosing retreats, and mindfulness apps. According to *Forbes*, by 2017, Google, Intel, Aetna, and General Mills were offering mindfulness training to employees to optimize performance. Workers were encouraged to improve their health in order to be more productive at their jobs and make more money for their employers. In healthcare, with employer health-insurance premiums and deductibles rising rapidly, Americans turned to a chaotic array of new products to keep away from the doctor. The US supplement market grew steadily throughout the 2010s, rising from $11.5 billion in 2012 to $71.6 billion in 2024, notably accelerating during the pandemic lockdown period and beyond. Fueled by often-unverified health claims, products touted by extremists of different political stripes, but much more successfully publicized by the far right—such as raw milk, colloidal silver, and unfluoridated water—have skyrocketed in popularity since the pandemic.

In May 2025, Kennedy drank shots of raw milk in the White House with the podcaster/influencer Carnivore MD. Raw milk is milk that has not been pasteurized—that is, heated to 145 degrees Fahrenheit, killing all bacteria. Partly because raw milk is heavily regulated and farms that sell it are routinely raided by the FDA, it has become a pet cause of the libertarian "food freedom" movement, which seeks to liberate the purchase and consumption of food from restrictions and regulations. Unlike many of the products favored by food libertarians, raw milk has advocates on the left, including Michael Pollan. Its fans claim that it has health benefits, including the ability to decrease rates of allergies and asthma, and they can cite scientific research that backs them up. Today's right-wing raw-milk advocates, however, don't seem particularly concerned with food safety. *National Review*, downplaying the

role raw milk played in the spread of avian flu in 2024, argues that we should be able to buy what can kill us if we want to, putting milk in the same category as cigarettes.

Proponents of raw water—untreated, unfiltered, and unsterilized drinking water—are wary of tap or filtered water because of its fluoride and chlorine content and because of possible contamination from any lead pipes it may have traveled through. And they believe that, like raw milk, it contains healthy bacteria that can prevent diseases. The raw-water trend was mainly pre-pandemic, especially among the health-conscious Silicon Valley tech community, but the fear of fluoridated water has persisted in alternative-health sectors. Kennedy has called on states to ban the fluoridation of tap water. Fluoridated water protects against tooth decay, and while over-fluoridation can damage teeth and bones, anti-fluoride activists, citing mostly inconclusive studies, maintain that it can cause bone cancer, cognitive impairment, and ADHD. For conservatives, it's another example of the government inserting itself into our lives and forcing a dangerous poison into our bodies.

Today, instead of a healthier population, we have a right-wing, performance-enhancement-oriented "health" movement full of anti-vaxxers, MAGA influencers, and nootropic enthusiasts. While liberal urbanites no longer dine on grass-fed burgers and duck-fat fries beneath bare Edison bulbs, tradwife momfluencers now feed sourdough pancakes to their broods of unvaccinated children. The distinction turned out to be cosmetic. Both of these demographics make choices about how they want to be perceived and how they want to spend their disposable income. And both invoke their consumption habits to score points against the other side. Citing a study showing that conservative men have higher levels of testosterone, JD Vance told Joe Rogan last year, "Maybe that's why the Democrats want us all to be, you know, poor-health and overweight is because it means we're going to be more liberal, right? If you make people less healthy, they apparently become more politically liberal." No longer the party of the Big Gulp–guzzling fatso, the young Chads of MAGA want you to know that they're stacked supermen and their bodies are temples.

A recent article in the libertarian magazine *Reason* argued that the left bungled food messaging because of wokeness—that popular cookbook authors were canceled because of cultural appropriation and that influencers couldn't encourage healthy eating because that would count as fat shaming. While social media was, and continues to be, a hotbed of culture-war goofiness, people yelling about lentils in the comments section of *Jezebel* hardly accounts for the rise of RFK Jr. The contemporary food

ALEX WROBLEWSKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

movement's rightward orientation isn't really a reaction to left-wing food philosophy. In fact, despite its cultural coding, the food movement of the 2010s was never especially left-wing to begin with. Instead, with both liberal and conservative factions proposing we shop our way to better health, is it any wonder that the side that has always been better friends with big business won the food-messaging war?

The Obamas' healthy-eating initiatives were full of programs designed to help motivate people to make good food choices. One example was a partnership with Walmart to nudge shoppers toward healthier foods through new packaging. According to Partnership for a Healthier America, a nonprofit created in conjunction with the initiatives, by the end of 2015 Walmart had reduced the amount of sugar in its branded packaged foods by 10 percent and had saved Americans $1 billion per year by lowering the prices of fruits and vegetables, as well as opening or renovating hundreds of stores in food deserts. Walmart also closed some stores during this period, creating new food deserts, but overall there was a net improvement in access. It's interesting, then, that this massive healthy-eating initiative undertaken by the nation's largest grocery chain, alongside new standards and legislation, did not result in lower obesity rates.

Carnival barkers: Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s MAHA Summit invited no scientists, but plenty of health start-up CEOs.

Rather than offering a cornucopia of health, the opening of a Walmart store in a poor community is correlated with a 2.3 percent increase in obesity levels. This makes sense when you consider that Walmart also sells cheaper, calorie-rich processed food in bulk. That's the kind of food that Walmart's own poorly paid employees can afford. As the largest private employer in the nation, Walmart's labor practices impoverish some of its own shoppers—and in turn impact their food choices. If you're underpaid and overworked, or underemployed and dead broke, the fact that healthy food is available doesn't mean it's accessible.

Is it any wonder that the side that has always been better friends with big business won the food-messaging war?

The left-leaning food movement had a real opening to foment collective change. But its reach mostly stopped at the cash register. It was about making good choices as individuals in the free market and never about the choices made for us by our employers. It never looked at how our work lives inform how and what we eat.

(Levin, continued on page 39)

THE LONG SHADOW OF THE "JEWISH QUESTION"

JOSEPH DANA

After the horrors of the Holocaust, Israel was hailed as the solution to a fundamentally antisemitic debate.

Now, as long ago, Jews are questioning the question.

In late August 1908, some 70 delegates crowded into a hall in Czernowitz, the cosmopolitan capital of Austrian Bukovina. They had come from Warsaw and Galicia and cities across Eastern Europe for the First Yiddish Language Conference. Leading writers like I.L. Peretz were present; Sholem Aleichem had wanted to attend but was kept away by illness. For five days, they argued about the nature of Jewish languages and whether the one named in the conference title—the one spoken by Eastern Europe's Jewish masses—was a legitimate national tongue or merely a corrupted jargon of exile.

For Nathan Birnbaum, the man who had organized the gathering, this was not a matter of mere academic import; it was a question of existential significance. Born in Vienna in 1864 to an assimilated family, Birnbaum had grown up largely secular yet rejected the assumption that Jews should dissolve into the surrounding German-Austrian culture. With his determined stare and full beard projecting well below his throat, he could be easily mistaken for Theodor Herzl at the time.

The two men had, in fact, been allies for a period. Nearly two decades earlier, in 1890, Birnbaum had coined the term *Zionism* while editing the early Zionist journal *Selbst-Emanzipation* (Self-Emancipation), and he was later elected secretary-general of the Zionist Organization at the First Zionist Congress in Basel. Later, however, he would abandon the Zionist movement and, in its stead, embrace a different vision for the future of the Jewish people—one that diverged wildly from political Zionism and was the implicit focus of the Czernowitz ingathering.

Birnbaum did not believe that the Yiddish-speaking Jews scattered from the Baltics to the Black Sea were failed Europeans awaiting transformation in Palestine, as the Zionist movement argued. Rather, they were a living nation deserving recognition where they already stood. The Czernowitz conference was meant to formalize this recognition by declaring Yiddish the national language of the Jewish people, not merely one among several. Such a declaration would have been a direct challenge to the Zionist project, which was busy reviving Hebrew as the tongue of a future state and dismissing Yiddish as a debased lingo of the diaspora.

But it was not to be. The conference included some Hebraists and Zionist sympathizers who refused to abandon Hebrew. The resulting compromise declared Yiddish "a" national language rather than "the" national language, preserving a role for Hebrew and the political vision it carried. Yet even in that careful phrasing, we can see the outlines of a long-buried history: an entire countertradition to the Zionist project that Birnbaum had once helped build.

More than a century after the Cernowitz conference—after Birnbaum had turned away from Zionism and toward diaspora—the questions that propelled his transformation have returned with a fierce urgency among a small but growing cohort of Jews. Horrified by the ongoing annihilation of Gaza and the slow-motion ethnic cleansing of the West Bank, they have begun to challenge the orthodoxy that undergirds Zionism—and, with it, to entertain ideas that were unthinkable only a few years ago.

Joseph Dana is a writer with two decades of experience in the Middle East and Africa. He lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

FAR RIGHT: IMAGNO / GETTY IMAGES

***Mame-loshn*:** Attendees at the First Yiddish Language Conference in Czernowitz, 1908.

Nathan Birnbaum: The Viennese writer and thinker who created the term *Zionism*, only to reject it years later.

Theodor Herzl: The Austro-Hungarian journalist and lawyer who is widely considered the founder of modern political Zionism.

THE LONG SHADOW OF THE "JEWISH QUESTION"

Birnbaum's Yiddish-speaking Jews were not failed Europeans awaiting transformation in Palestine.

Palestinians, of course, have understood these ideas for decades. What feels like a discovery to some diaspora Jews is what Palestinians have been saying since Zionism's logic was first enacted upon them. And yet, as Birnbaum's story suggests, the critiques now taking shape in the corridors of Jewish life are not altogether alien to the tradition. Today's generations simply aren't aware of it.

This is not an accident. The words of men like Nathan Birnbaum appear in virtually no Hebrew-school curricula, and their ideas are featured in no synagogue sermons. Their absence from the story, however, is part of the story. Thinkers like Birnbaum were pushed aside because they complicated a narrative that needed to feel inevitable: that Zionism is the only viable answer to Jewish existence in the modern world.

"Where we live, there is our country": An election poster of the General Jewish Labor Bund, circa 1917, in Kyiv.

Yosef Haim Brenner: A writer and poet who immigrated to Palestine and later became a fierce critic of Zionism.

When Birnbaum lived, this was a hotly debated notion—argued over, countered, and even opposed from Warsaw to New York. In those days, multiple visions of the Jewish future existed, competing for allegiance, and Zionism's current form was neither inevitable nor uncontested. The alternatives were themselves sophisticated political movements, with millions of adherents who understood Jewish existence differently from the territorial nationalism that eventually prevailed. Even now, their insights remain available, if obscured, ready to be recovered by those willing to look.

To understand how all these movements came to emerge at roughly the same time and place, it's necessary to revisit a debate then roiling Europe about the role of Jews in European societies. This debate was known as the "Jewish Question," and it did not originate with Jews. European Christians took it up in the decades following the French Revolution, when newly emancipated Jews began claiming citizenship in countries that had confined them to ghettos for centuries. Philosophers and politicians who called themselves liberals asked whether Jews could be loyal citizens of nations while remaining a "separate" people. The question was inherently antisemitic, treating Jewish difference as an anomaly that threatened the coherent nation-states Europeans were trying to build.

By the late 19th century, Jews had internalized this framing and began to offer their own answers. Some chose baptism or cultural assimilation. Others, like Birnbaum and then Herzl, proposed nationalism. Still others insisted on socialism or religious renewal. Yet in a number of these instances, the question itself went unquestioned. Rather than rejecting the framing of the Jewish Question, political Zionism, for example, internalized it and offered territorial sovereignty as the answer. Accepting the validity of the question meant accepting that something about Jewish existence needed to be fixed. Being Jewish in the diaspora was a pathology requiring a cure in the form of a political arrangement.

Birnbaum's answer was to invert the premise. Encountering the Yiddish-speaking masses of Eastern Europe, he later recalled, "I found them to be a people with all the signs of a living, separate nation; it became more and more clear to me that a nation that already exists does not have to be created again." His solution for this challenge was *Golus-Natsyonalizm*, or diaspora nationalism. The term was a provocation. *Golus*, the Yiddish word for exile, had always carried negative connotations in Jewish thought, rooted in the biblical concept of galut as divine punishment for Jewish sin and exile from the promised land after the Temple's destruction. Zionists used it to describe the shameful condition of Jewish dispersion that their movement would finally cure.

In explaining his break with the movement he had named, Birnbaum argued that "it is arbitrary to regard all cultural beginnings in the Golus simply as valuable cultural manure for just one potential culture on a soil which is not yet ours." Jews had maintained a distinct identity across centuries without sovereignty. Rather than viewing this as a deficiency to be corrected, he proposed understanding it as a unique form of national existence. Nations did not require territory to exist. The millions of Yiddish speakers scattered across Eastern Europe already constituted a nation through their language, their institutions, and their shared culture. They did not need to go anywhere.

Birnbaum left behind no institution bearing his name, but he did leave a legacy of searching that never arrived at a destination. Within a decade after the Yiddish Language Conference, he had undergone what later Orthodox writers would describe as a *baal teshuvah* journey—a return to religion. He began arguing that Jewish peoplehood was primarily covenantal rather than political. Jews were God's people before they were a nation in any modern sense. National revival without Torah was spiritually empty. Worse, it risked becoming idolatry of power.

Birnbaum turned from Zionism because he recognized that national self-assertion accepted the antisemitic premise it claimed to escape. Diaspora nationalism offered something better—cultural autonomy without displacement—but he lived long enough to suspect that it could not protect communities from destruction. What Birnbaum grasped by the end of his life was that the question itself was the trap: Asking where Jews could be accepted assumed that they were not already. The real issue was whether states

could tolerate plurality, and on that question the 20th century would deliver a terrible verdict.

The Holocaust was Hitler's answer to the Jewish Question. The Nazis called it the *Endlösung der Judenfrage*—literally, the final solution to the Jewish Question—and murdered 6 million Jews in pursuit of it. Communities that had endured for centuries were erased, from Warsaw to Thessaloniki. But even amid so much horror, the genocide did not convince the world to abandon the question that had proved so destructive to Jewish existence. Instead, it drove its survivors toward a different answer: territorial sovereignty.

"A Jewish people cannot be kept alive without a Jewish country," declared David Ben-Gurion, who would become Israel's first prime minister, at the World Zionist Conference in 1945. It was a message that he, and then many others, would continue to press.

Yet the lessons of the catastrophe were more ambiguous than the Zionist narrative allowed. The Holocaust revealed not the failure of diaspora strategies but the lethal consequences of European nationalism, the very ideology that Zionism sought to join rather than transcend. And Europe's enthusiastic support for a Jewish state reflected something other than philosemitism. The postwar displaced-persons camps were full of Jews who could not return to their former homes because their communities had been erased, and all too many of their former neighbors did not want them rebuilt. A Jewish state in Palestine solved Europe's Jewish problem while absolving European guilt. It redirected the surviving remnant toward the Middle East rather than demanding their reintegration into societies that had betrayed them. Zionism's triumph owed as much to European rejection as to Jewish embrace.

At the same time, Zionism had little initial appeal for millions of Jews who lived beyond the borders of Mitteleuropa. The Jewish Question had also always been a European question, born from the specific pathology of Christian antisemitism. For Jews in the Middle East and North Africa, the question was framed differently, if it was framed at all. They faced discrimination and occasional violence, but not the same existential debate about whether Jewish existence required justification or a cure. The Israeli sociologist Yehouda Shenhav has argued that Zionism simultaneously needed and structurally marginalized these Jews. Israel required their bodies for demographic weight against Palestinians while also subjecting them to what Shenhav calls "de-Arabization," or the forced shedding of the Arabic language and culture. Communities like the Iraqi Jews, which had been distant from political Zionism even when they harbored the traditional yearning for Zion, found themselves conscripted into a project that denied both their Arab belonging and their agency—making them, in Shenhav's formulation, "other victims" of Zionism, alongside Palestinians.

In gerangl: Socialists and Bundists remember the victims of the October 1905 pogroms in Vilnius.

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Even among American Jews, the Zionist project met with ambivalence. Before 1967, Israel remained a small and struggling state that inspired philanthropy but little identification that could compete with their American identity. The conflict that would become known among Israelis as the Six-Day War, and among Arabs as the 1967 war, changed everything. Israel's dramatic victory over the Arab armies created a new emotional center for American Jewish life by fusing ancient religious longing with modern military triumph and the promise of a thrilling alternative identity in ways that proved irresistible. Within a decade, support for Israel had become the organizing principle of American Jewish institutional life. The competing answers to the questions of Jewish existence that had flourished before the war receded as Israel moved to the foreground. By the 1980s, most American Jews could not remember that any alternative had ever existed.

That consensus has begun to fracture. The cracks appeared well before October 7, 2023, in the growing discomfort of younger Jews who could not reconcile what they had been taught about Jewish values with what they saw Israel doing in their name. Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza accelerated what was already underway. For a growing number of Jews, the question is no longer whether Israel has gone too far in this particular military campaign. The question is whether Zionism has led somewhere they can no longer follow.

This rebellion matters even if it's statistically small because it undermines the generational project of Jewish communal support for Israel—a project that has played no small part in shoring up the state through funds, fresh immigrants, and foot soldiers. It also threatens the political architecture that American Jewish organizations spent decades constructing.

Birnbaum was pushed aside because he complicated a narrative that needed to feel inevitable.

Politicians have long equated support for Israel with securing Jewish votes and donations, an assumption that has shaped everything from military aid to UN vetoes. The conflation of Jewish interests with Israeli interests was never quite accurate, but it has functioned as political reality because the major Jewish organizations enforced it and punished any deviation. This revolt offers the potential to reshape the political calculations that have underwritten American support for Israel in both parties, which is precisely why

defenders of the old consensus treat every crack as an existential threat requiring immediate containment. And why retrieving the history of early dissenters matters.

Nathan Birnbaum was not alone in recognizing where the Zionist project was heading. In the movement's early decades, the General Jewish Labor Bund, which at one point numbered 100,000 members spread across the Pale of Settlement, rejected territorial nationalism for socialist internationalism. Orthodox rabbis denounced Zionism as a heretical attempt to force the divine hand. Reform Judaism in the United States declared that Jews were a religious community, not a nation, and wanted no part of a Jewish state. Even committed Zionists argued furiously among themselves about whether the goal was political sovereignty or cultural revival, and how those goals might be accomplished.

The Hebrew writer Yosef Haim Brenner was wrestling with these questions from within Ottoman Palestine, where he had immigrated in 1909 to work the land and participate in the Zionist project he would later come to critique. Born in present-day Ukraine in 1881, Brenner had come to Zionism through literature as much as through politics. He was drawn to the dream of reviving Hebrew as a living language capable of expressing modern Jewish consciousness. Slight and intense, with the appearance of someone who slept too little and worried too much, Brenner had already established himself as a major literary voice before arriving in Jaffa. His stories and essays transformed Hebrew from a language of prayer and sacred texts into one that could capture the ambivalence and despair of contemporary life. He had done as much as anyone to make the Zionist cultural revival possible, which made his growing critique feel like betrayal to pioneers who believed they were building something unprecedented in Palestine's fields.

Praying with their bodies: Rabbi Andy Kahn (second from left), along with members of Rabbis for Ceasefire, blocks the Brooklyn Bridge during a Yom Kippur protest against the Gaza genocide.

The debate was called the "Jewish Question," but it did not originate with Jews. European Christians invented it.

Where Birnbaum in Czernowitz saw Yiddish-speaking communities as a living nation that needed recognition rather than relocation, Brenner in Jaffa watched Zionist settlement and saw ancient patterns of exclusion in modern political form. Brenner shared the anxiety of contemporaries who saw the Zionist project as built on a volcano. In letters, he was direct about the situation in Palestine: "You want to provide refuge for an injured sparrow in a rooster's coop?" The two men occupied opposite poles of the Jewish world—Birnbaum championed diaspora as home, while Brenner made the journey to the ancestral land—yet both arrived at the same basic recognition: A movement that accepted Jewish existence as a problem requiring solution would create a state that embodied that problem rather than transcend it.

Brenner saw the self-deception at the heart of the enterprise but didn't live long enough to watch it play out. He was murdered in the 1921 Jaffa riots, and his death became a symbol of Zionist sacrifice, while his warnings about the violence that territorial nationalism would generate on all sides were largely forgotten.

At the same time that figures like Birnbaum and Brenner began to question where the Zionist project was heading, the Bundist movement offered yet another sophisticated alternative that history destroyed rather than defeated. Founded in Vilna in 1897, the same year as the First Zionist Congress, the General Jewish Labor Bund built what aimed to be an entire civilization within the Russian Empire and later Poland, based on the principle that Jewish workers' liberation would come through solidarity with their neighbors rather than separation from them. Where Birnbaum emphasized cultural autonomy and Brenner wrestled with the self-deceptions of the pioneers in Palestine, the Bund insisted on class as the fulcrum of Jewish fate and identity. Jewish factory workers in Warsaw had more in common with Polish workers in the same factories than with Jewish bankers in Berlin, and class solidarity could transcend ethnic division if given structural opportunity rather than being undermined by nationalist separation.

The Bund rejected the very premise of the Jewish Question, insisting that Jews didn't need

SELCUK ACAR / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

to go anywhere or become anything other than what they were. What they needed was cultural autonomy, political representation, and economic justice where they already lived. The movement's institutional ambitions matched its ideological ones. Yiddish schools taught Jewish children their history and culture without Zionist ideology, while theaters produced plays that spoke to contemporary Jewish life rather than biblical fantasy.

The Bundists worked vigorously throughout the early 20th century to offer a distinct vision of a Jewish future until most of them were murdered by Nazis and Soviets alike, their institutions destroyed and their leaders executed. Vanishingly few lived to see what came next. In the decades that followed, the erasure of these alternatives came to serve a political purpose: Their destruction was recast as proof of their failure, while Israel's survival became proof of Zionism's success. The logic was circular but effective: Zionism's competitors had been eliminated, which meant Zionism must have been right all along. To suggest otherwise was not only to engage in folly but to flirt with antisemitism.

These days, some Jews have begun suggesting otherwise and doing so in the name of Jewish tradition itself.

The most unexpected institutional expression of this recovery may be the revival of the American Council for Judaism. Most American Jews have never heard of it, in part because the organization's opponents worked to ensure it would be forgotten. "They tried to cover the footprints of the folks that they exiled from the tent," Rabbi Andy Kahn, who now leads the reconstituted ACJ, told me. The organization was founded in 1942 by 36 Reform rabbis who believed that their movement, in embracing Zionism, was abandoning its founding principles. (The Union for Reform Judaism officially endorsed Zionism in 1937.) They specifically pointed to the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, which included the declaration that Jews "consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community." For more than half a century, this was mainstream Reform theology. The ACJ grew to 14,000 members by 1948 before collapsing after the 1967 war.

JACOB LAZARUS / MIDDLE EAST IMAGE / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Then came the genocide in Gaza. In September 2024, the ACJ revamped its board and appointed Kahn as executive director. "The ACJ is being reconstituted as it is now because it was the last gasp of a mode of Reform Judaism that was completely crushed under the heel of Zionism in America," Kahn explains. Kahn had served as associate rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in New York from 2018 to 2023, the same congregation where a group of Reform rabbis had founded the ACJ eight decades earlier. His path from one of American Judaism's most prestigious pulpits to leading its most marginal institution traces the transformation underway. "This generation has now realized—and been told pretty explicitly by the people in highest power in the Reform movement—that there's no space for us in the movement," Kahn says. "If we want something, we're going to have to make our own way."

This rebellion matters because it undermines the generational project of Jewish communal support for Israel.

In April 2025, Kahn publicly declined an invitation to speak at Emanu-El's anniversary service because Israeli President Isaac Herzog was listed as a speaker. For Kahn, the goal is not simply opposition, but the construction of something beyond the current impasse. "There's no way out of the Zionist hegemonic claim to American Judaism that isn't through it," he says. "So you can't just pretend like it's not there." He adds, "You do have to process it and move beyond it. But that has to be the goal. The goal can't be staying here and just fighting Zionists forever. The goal has to be a much wider horizon of a Judaism that is beyond that."

Breaking the siege: Rabbi Abby Stein of Rabbis for Ceasefire demands increased humanitarian aid for Gaza during a Passover protest at Israel's Erez Crossing in April 2024.

The shift extends beyond the United States. In the United Kingdom, Na'amod has built a movement that has grown from roughly 200 members to more than 700 since October 2023. "A lot of the people who have joined in the last few years, myself included, are kind of newer to this side of activism, to this particular issue, but felt moved to join," says a Na'amod organizer who declined to be named for fear of retribution. They gather for Shabbat dinners and organize protests against Israel's occupation of Palestinian land outside the Foreign Office. Founded in 2018 after Israeli soldiers shot unarmed Palestinian protesters at the Gaza fence, the group recited Kaddish in Parliament Square for the Palestinian dead and has since gained what one sociologist called "influence disproportionate to their size."

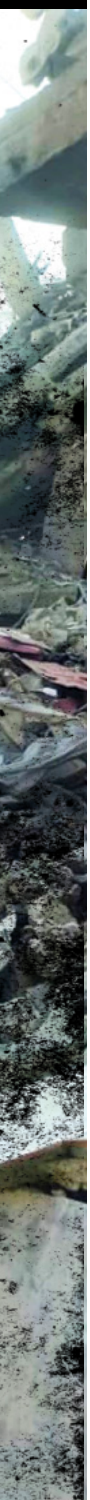
The theological grounding for this work echoes Birnbaum's diaspora nationalism. The Na'amod representative described a workshop on the Shema, the twice-daily prayer that constitutes Judaism's central declaration of faith, that reframed her understanding of Jewish life. "It was that Judaism is something we carry around us and that we create around us. It's not something that is in the land," she says. "It's not something that we need from a place." Birnbaum would have agreed that Jewish existence never required territorial sovereignty because the tradition itself is portable, sustained by practice, text, and community rather than borders.

Meanwhile, in 2024, the Jewish Council of Australia formed to explicitly challenge the claim that established Zionist organizations spoke for all Jews. When the council called for sanctions on Israel and an end to military ties, it framed its position as emerging from rather than contradicting its members' Jewishness. "Opposing this genocide is an expression of our Jewishness and an honouring of our ancestors who were themselves the victims of genocide," they wrote, articulating what increasing numbers of diaspora Jews have come to believe.

(Dana, continued on page 47)

Despite a "ceasefire," Israel's killing has not ended. Neither has the determination of the Palestinian people to survive.

Gaza Is Still Here



ALI SKAIK

Gaza has been suspended in a bloody limbo for months. The so-called ceasefire with Israel has not brought peace. The bombings and demolitions persist, and Israel's expanding occupation continues unabated. Since October 10, 2025, when the ceasefire was declared, more than 440 people have been killed and more than 2,500 buildings destroyed. Israel has only allowed a fraction of the essential equipment needed for cooking, heating, and construction to enter the Strip. Gaza is now buried beneath 680 million tons of rubble. Ninety percent of the population has been displaced, many of them several times. Hundreds of thousands live in threadbare tents.

The "ceasefire" is meant to breed apathy among us; the spectacle of modern genocidal warfare has been replaced by the slow bureaucratic proceedings of ethnic cleansing. Washington's hollow promises to bring "technocratic governance" to Gaza mask a colonial project imposed on a people with no say: a people left to die, forgotten by the world.

This, then, is where we return. In early February, *The Nation* gave over its website for a day to writers from Gaza. We did this to make it clear that we will remain focused on Gaza and the Palestinian people. No diplomatic proceedings or political distortions will subdue our demand for their right to self-determination—or their right to speak for themselves.

What follows are two pieces from our recent series. They are an affirmation of that right: a record of Gaza's refusal, in the face of the world's neglect, to be exterminated.

—Rayan El Amine, Lizzy Ratner, and Jack Mirkinson

The Street That Refuses to Die

ALI SKAIK

I used to know this block, the "colorful block," by the sound of life.

Children's laughter spilled from every doorway; men argued playfully over the price of tomatoes; my uncle's supermarket—bright and packed with goods of every kind—glowed late into the night. The refrigerator hummed, the bulbs buzzed, and the air smelled like oranges and detergent.

That was before everything went dark.

When I came back after the ceasefire, I could barely recognize the street. The neighborhood, once painted in pinks, blues, and yellows to chase away the gloom of the blockade, had turned the color of dust. My uncle's supermarket was only a blackened frame. Where the candy aisle once stood, a twisted shopping cart lay half-buried in rubble.

People say the war has ended. But walking here, among roofless rooms and doorways that open onto the sky, you understand: The war has only changed shape. The bombs have mostly stopped falling, but the silence that's followed is its own kind of violence.

So I decided to try to breach the quiet, to walk this block—house to house, neighbor to neighbor—and ask people how they are living, what they are rebuilding, and what they are still carrying from the genocide that tried to erase us.

"Don't let my children become numbers"

A little way down the block, in a half-plastered room, sat Nour al-Huda al-Nabih, 33. Stacked neatly beside her was a pile of books, all for her PhD research.

She and her husband, Arafat, live alone here now. They survived, but their children, Ahmad and Rasha, did not.

"Rasha was 11," Nour told me, her voice steady. "She was strong, always looking after her brother. In her little will, she wrote, 'Please don't yell at Ahmad.'"

Her eyes softened. "Ahmad was so kind. He used to share his snacks with everyone."

After the ceasefire, the first thing Nour did was visit their graves. Then she returned to her doctoral studies, researching trauma in Gaza. "When I help children smile," she said, "I feel my own children smiling somewhere, too."

When she visits the market, she still finds herself reaching for the snacks Ahmad and Rasha used to love. "Sometimes I whisper, 'If they were here, I'd buy this for them.'"

Then she looked straight at me. "My message to the world: Don't let my children become numbers. Remember their names. Gaza has always stood for the world; now the world must stand for Gaza."

"They want a land without people"

On the sidewalk sat Mohammad Mansour, 74, wrapped in a wool scarf despite the heat.

"Since the Balfour Declaration in 1917," he began, "we've been living this occupation. They want a land without people. This genocide is their way of finishing the project."

He listed what was destroyed: homes, schools, mosques. "They even turned it into a war on faith," he said.

Before the war, $30 could fill his pantry. During the genocide, one kilo of onions cost $100. "Now prices go up and down like bombs," he said.

He spoke of two people he'll never forget: young Aref Abu Laban, who was killed while helping his mother pick lemons, and his old friend Mohammad al-Saidi, who had dreamed up the Colorful Block project that once made these walls bright. "He believed color could defeat despair," Mansour said. "Now the walls are gray again, but the dream is still alive in my heart."

"We live as if the war never stopped"

I met Dunya Ashour, 19, when she was taking some photos of the destruction of the New Ajjami Mosque.

Ali Skaik and Rasha Abou Jalal are writers and journalists based in Gaza. Rayan El Amine is a journalist based in New York City.

Everything is gone. And yet, somehow, everyone is still here. Each neighbor carries a piece of Gaza's story.

"I don't feel the ceasefire," she told me. "At night I still wake up to explosions two kilometers away, in the yellow zones. I can smell the gunpowder in the air."

She lost her favorite teacher, Arij al-Maydana, as well as her grandfather, Jameel. "I carry their loss every day," she said, "but I tell myself they're in a better place."

Against all odds, she finished her high school exams after two years of delay. "I studied under bombardment," she said proudly. "I got 92.4 percent."

Her family is displaced; their house is gone. "We might leave Gaza if the Rafah border opens," she said. "But I want to come back one day as Dr. Dunya." She will return, she often says, as the dentist who rebuilt her own smile.

"No place is sacred anymore"

I talked to Montaser Tarazi, 35, in the Latin monastery church located next to the Colorful Block. Montaser is Christian.

What used to be: Before Israel's genocide began, the Colorful Block hummed with vibrancy, a symbol of the pride of the people of Gaza.

"After the ceasefire, things became slightly less dangerous," he said. "I can walk to the market again without fearing I'll die halfway. But the loss… " He paused. "The loss walks with us."

His best friend, Dr. Suliman Tarazi, a dentist, was killed while taking shelter in the Orthodox Church. "That strike broke something in all of us," he said. "If even the church can be bombed, nowhere is sacred."

Montaser's house was destroyed. For three weeks, he and his family cleared rubble by hand. "We rebuild with our fingers," he explained. But without equipment or cement, they gave up. It was like trying to plant a tree in ashes.

Yet he still believes in change. "If a unity government forms, if aid finally enters without limits, maybe Gaza can breathe again," he said. "After more than 68,000 martyrs, something in us must change forever."

"Life, even like this, is a gift"

At the entrance to the block stood my maternal uncle Hassan Skaik, 29, in front of what used to be his supermarket—the same one where I once worked.

"I feel both good and bad," he told me. "Good, because the blood stopped flowing. Bad, because everything else stopped too."

His supermarket is destroyed: the refrigerators crushed, the shelves twisted. "Before, it was full of lights and laughter," he said. "Now I only hear my own echo."

He lost nine friends from the Saqqa family in one air strike. "It still feels unreal," he said softly.

At night, he dreams he is running from Israel's fire belts. "Every night, the same nightmare," he said. But he's learning to be grateful for survival. "We've started from zero before," he said. "We'll do it again."

"Finding water is our new war"

At the far end of the street, Mahmoud Haddad, 38, stood by a cracked water tank, his shirt soaked from work.

"The only thing that changed after the ceasefire," he said, "is that the bombs are quieter."

He and his neighbors cleared debris from a collapsed saltwater well, trying to make it usable again. "The municipality doesn't work," he said, "so we do it ourselves."

They ration water by the liter. "Drinking water costs $2 for 20 liters, if you find it," he said. "Sometimes we share one liter for two days."

His friend and coworker Diya Hammam was killed in the war. "He made everyone laugh," Mahmoud said. "Now the whole street is silent."

He believes the only real solution begins with education. "If the schools reopen, Gaza will start breathing again," he said. "Without education, we're just surviving."

"The crisis is in my heart"

Khaled Al Saqqa, 28, is one of the few survivors of his family. His mother and seven siblings were killed.

"I'm the dead one," he said. "They're the ones alive."

Every morning, he visits the rubble of his house. "I touch the walls," he said. "I talk to them. I tell them I'm still here."

Khaled recently married. He is working on setting up a tent over the rubble of his home to live in with his wife, Dareen. "Rebuilding isn't about cement," he said. "It's about learning to live again."

He looked at me with tired eyes. "The crisis isn't in the ruins," he said. "It's in my heart. But every breath I take here is for them."

When night falls in the Zeitoun neighborhood, the street glows again—not with electricity, but with firelight. Families cook lentils on makeshift stoves; children chase shadows with tin cans for toys. The scent of smoke mixes with sea air and memory.

I stop at the ruins of the supermarket. The tiles are cracked, but if I close my eyes, I can still hear my uncle calling, "Cold slush! Come before it's gone!"

He was right to warn us. Everything is gone.

And yet, somehow, everyone is still here.

Each neighbor carries a piece of Gaza's story—a mosaic of grief, faith, and stubborn hope. They are rebuilding not just homes, but the meaning of life itself.

Before I leave, I see a boy running through the rubble, barefoot, laughing, a kite made from a plastic aid bag fluttering behind him. It catches the last of the light from the setting sun.

For a second, it feels like color has returned.

ATIA DARWISH

The Home Without Walls

RASHA ABOU JALAL

We—my husband and our five children—did not return home this past October, after a ceasefire paused the bloody Israeli war that stretched for two years. There was, to be more precise, no home to return to; it was obliterated in the first weeks of the war. No traces remain. We have only the memories now.

As of this writing, we have settled in a rented house in the south of Gaza City—though "house" is a generous description. It is the remnants of a home. There are no walls here; it is a shelter that itself seems ambivalent toward our habitation. Our children run wild through a living room that opens directly onto rubble, so the threat of their falling through the ruins is always imminent.

I still remember my husband's gaze as we prepared to move into the house. Looking around, he said, "We can't possibly live here, but we'll build a home, even if it must be built out of nothing."

He began gathering old scraps of wood and nylon. Enlisting the help of a few friends who were craftsmen, he fastened wooden planks to the wall and stretched nylon over the hollow gaps, creating a makeshift cover to protect our children.

The walls are flimsy, trembling violently in the breeze. But this is all we have. Despite the ceasefire, Israel has prohibited building materials from entering the Strip. There is no cement, no steel, no real tools to build with.

Still, my husband didn't wait. He kneaded red clay with water and, with the help of those same friends, pasted the mixture over the holes that had formed in the corners of our home.

I watched him carefully smooth the cement, patchworking gravel in the little crevices. "Will it hold?" I asked.

Without looking up, he replied, "What's important is not whether this will hold, but whether we will."

Every detail of this home is imprinted with memories of displacement. The nylon that drapes the walls recalls tent shelters, the wooden planks the long nights out in the cold, and the red clay the ground where we pitched the tents that flooded with every rainfall. Twelve times we were forced to move, each time fleeing toward the same, singular mirage: safety. We have spent so long living among stopgaps, it has become difficult to imagine our lives as anything more than provisional.

Because of the Israeli blockade, we are left to rebuild our lives with the crudest of devices, as though what follows a genocidal attack on our land is a test. To survive now, we must prove that we are deserving of life at its most primitive. With every repair, it is as if we are asking permission for a permanence that may one day allow us to build a home that preserves our dignity.

In late December, heavy rain fell across Gaza City. As we watched the sky from our home, a tentative knock came at the door. My brother-in-law and his family stood there, soaked and weary, holding in their arms their children and the few clothes they owned.

Their tent, at a shelter site west of Gaza City, had been swept away by the rain. The dirt beneath it had sunk amid the downpour, and the nylon could not hold against the wind. Our home, already too small to hold the seven of us, had suddenly turned into a refuge.

Life goes on: This tent was what passed as a home for Rasha Abou Jalal and her family when the Gaza "ceasefire" began in October 2025.

My sister-in-law, sitting on the ground, pressed one of her children against her chest, trying desperately to warm them. Her body trembled. I asked her, calmly, "What happened, exactly?" She sighed. "The rain came all at once; water seeped in from underneath the tent. We tried to lift the covers, to pull the ropes tight, but the ground had already turned to mud."

She fell silent for a second, then whispered, "When the tent collapsed, I didn't have a thought—I grabbed the children and ran." I asked her if she had saved anything. "No, the blankets were flooded, the mattresses were soaked, even the food spoiled."

My husband said, "We can't possibly live here, but we'll build a home, even if it must be built out of nothing."

In this home, there is no space to spare, no real rooms, and the cold seeps in through every crevice. Despite that, we spread out across the ground together and shared what little we had of blankets, bread, and warmth.

My sister-in-law looked around and said, "Your home is small, but it saved us."

I didn't know what to say. The house we live in is falling apart, a shelter that requires daily repair. But in Gaza, we have stopped asking whether one has enough. The question now is only whether you can share what little you have.

We didn't sleep well that night. The children were restless,

RASHA ABOU JALAL

and the sound of rainfall lasted until morning. Laying there, I thought of the thousands of families who had no door to knock on.

The tent, a temporary refuge, had become a threat. It took only rain to lay bare how fragile all of this was. Aid remains insufficient; our shelters are unsafe. We live a life deferred. Rain was once a merciful thing. Now it exposes the extent of our deprivation.

The struggle endures: More than 9,000 children in Gaza were treated for acute malnutrition in a single month, according to UNICEF.

In Gaza, we exist in an interim. The impermanence of our lives has forced us into a state of constant apprehension. Even food demands an intolerable patience. Cooking gas is not available in the Strip, so we've been forced to build a clay oven in the corner of our home. For hours, I stand by a fire, cooking whatever food has been made available to us. Over and over, I feed wood into the opening, stir the pot, watch clouds of smoke rise and disappear. Most residents depend on such a clay oven, and so the smell of burning wood has become ubiquitous.

When the flames flare up, a thick smoke shrouds the room. This cloud must, of course, enter my lungs before it can exit through the window. Without fail, I choke, step back for a moment to catch my breath, and return again. Gasping for air, I wonder every time whether even food now demands a breath longer than I can manage.

This daily ritual is not a choice; it's the direct consequence of a deliberate policy. Israel denies the entry of cooking gas so that our lives remain suspended over fire, wood, and smoke.

The small quantities allowed into the Strip force an untenable financial decision. Before the war, a kilo of cooking gas was 20 shekels; today it is more than 100. It's a price most families in Gaza cannot afford, particularly after their savings were drained by the war—an economy of destitution that has made cooking itself a health hazard.

We ask only for enough food, for milk, for something besides hunger to greet our children in this wicked world.

Not that there is much food for us to cook. Despite the ceasefire, Israel continues to limit the entry of food aid and other basic necessities into Gaza. As a result, hunger has become more regular than bombardment. Harsher, perhaps, in its silence and its protraction.

Over the months, the realities of this siege have crept across the Strip and into our home, even into my sister's womb.

In the middle of December, my sister gave birth to a child a few days earlier than she was expecting. Immediately, his cry was not as it should have been; his screams did not fill the room the way a newborn's usually do. They were debilitated and fitful, as if he were apologizing for entering a world that had nothing for him.

The room fell silent after the midwife placed him on the scale. His weight was far from healthy. Startlingly thin, he weighed just over three and a half pounds. It appeared as though his skin had been pulled tight over tiny, underdeveloped bones.

The doctor looked at my nephew, and then back at my sister's washed-out face. "This child suffered from malnutrition inside the womb. His condition is fragile. Any simple infection could threaten his life."

My sister looked at me with eyes drowned in fear. "I could feel he was exhausted inside me," she said. "I couldn't eat. We lived through months of harsh hunger. Weeks went by when I couldn't get enough food."

Her pregnancy had coincided with the worst months of the famine, between March and October 2025. My sister lived on two inadequate meals a day: lentils, dry bread, sometimes only tea to quiet her hunger. Like any pregnant woman, she needed milk, vitamins, and prenatal supplements, all of which had vanished or were impossible to obtain. Even clean drinking water was not consistently available.

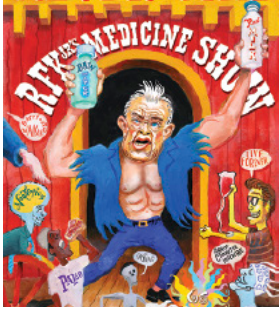
After his birth, my nephew was placed in an incubator inside a crowded hospital ward. There were barely enough machines for the newborns, and electricity was sporadic. My sister reached into the incubator and placed her finger in her baby's palm. He held on with such unexpected strength, as if stubbornly clinging to life.

His story is not an exception. In October alone, according to UNICEF, 9,300 children in Gaza were admitted for treatment for acute malnutrition. These numbers become faces in our homes: small bodies shivering in incubators, and mothers burdened with guilt because the siege has outpaced their ability to protect their children.

Today, my sister's baby sleeps wrapped in a piece of cloth much larger than his little frame. Winter is here and every breath is measured, every day another test of survival. We are not asking for a miracle. We ask only for enough food, for milk, for something besides hunger to greet our children in this wicked world. N

Rasha Abou Jalal's article was translated by Rayan El Amine.

SAEED M.M.T. JARAS / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES



(Levin, continued from page 27)

Between 1965 and 1995, time spent on cooking decreased by 40 percent. During the same period, union membership declined, the Democratic Party abandoned its working-class base, and both parties presided over the shrinking of the middle class. As the labor movement collapsed and our government marched rightward, our ability to nourish and care for our bodies declined. In 2023, according to a study by the Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts, 55.7 percent of all food purchased in the United States was prepared outside the home. Today, there may be more organic produce in supermarkets, but our living and working conditions largely prevent us from cooking and eating fresh and nourishing whole foods. With the food industry pressing junk food on us the moment we leave the house, and the hours we spend working increasing alongside the costs of food, housing, and childcare, it's no wonder that we continue to stress-eat our way to poor health.

The raw-milk-obsessed tech bros who have taken up the mantle of healthy eating have even fewer solutions to the wellness crisis than the Obama-era liberals did. Tradwife influencers might show off on TikTok how well they care for their five children while slow-braising a stew, but many celebrity social-media stars are members of the 1 percent, and their cooking idylls are fantasies for most working Americans. Right-wing wellness, like its liberal equivalent in the 2010s, exists mostly in the realm of individualistic aspiration. It presents a fantastic quest for what Naomi Klein describes in her 2023 book *Doppelganger* as the "you as you imagine you could be, with enough self-denial and self-discipline, enough hunger and enough reps. A better, different you, always just out of reach." MAHA's biohacks, supplements, and chronic-disease-management apps make bodily perfection seem possible, but they will not shorten the workday. They won't make the lives of gig workers or the underemployed less frenetic and uncertain. Unwilling to address our living and working conditions, the right just offers another health fairy tale.

We know for certain that RFK Jr. isn't going to make America healthy again, especially not with defunded and hollowed-out government health institutions. We also know that the Democratic Party, as it is currently composed, won't do much better—not with a leadership that's uninterested in pursuing the kinds of big government interventions that could actually transform the health of Americans. We also know that if we continue to do nothing, our food systems will change all on their own. The climate crisis is already impacting the global food supply. Because of rising temperatures, corn, soybean, and wheat production could decline as much as 50 percent by the end of the century. Industrial food production itself also contributes massively to climate change, from cattle ranching in the Amazon increasing greenhouse gases to food companies contributing 20 percent of global emissions merely in the transportation of food.

In 2023, 56 percent of all food purchased in the United States was prepared outside the home.

Fortunately, there is some light on the horizon, courtesy of another trend that locked into place in the long 2010s. The decade that started with home brews ended with a renewed interest in democratic socialism and a resurgent labor movement. My own evenings of slow-braising were replaced by meetings with the Democratic Socialists of America. I put my pickle jars away and bought a bullhorn. I learned that a real food movement can't just be about what we put in our bodies. More important than our consumer choices are the lives of the workers who grow the food, slaughter the animals, and drive the refrigerated trucks. Food systems will not be improved by individuals buying water-wasting organic cashews harvested by underpaid migrant workers in deadly temperatures.

The affluent aisle: Organic meat and produce are consistently more expensive than the nonorganic alternatives.

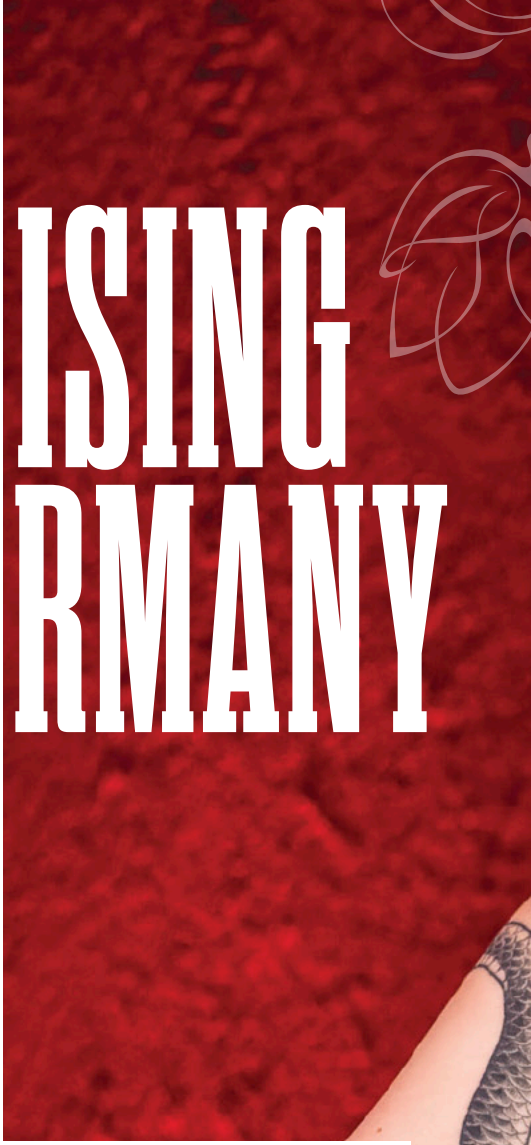
The left lost control over food messaging not because it got too woke but because it stagnated in a pool of contradictory consumer choices. To get it back, we need dynamic lawmakers willing to embrace big societal fixes that ensure that our food systems are just, safe, and sustainable. To have a shot at radically transforming the way we eat, we need a climate movement that incorporates workers, farmers, consumers, climate scientists, labor unions, and activists. To be sure, we do still need access to healthy food through programs like New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani's city-owned grocery stores—"a public option for produce"—to bring wholesome, inexpensive food into urban food deserts. But to eat well, we not only need access to inexpensive produce but also the time away from work to cook healthy meals for our families. We need food grown by fairly paid, unionized workers using sustainable agricultural techniques. So long as the reins of government are held by those who profit from our bad health and who are driving the climate crisis, it seems unlikely that our food systems or our health will improve. To have a serious impact, we need more than Michael Pollan's intellectual revolution in food systems. A full restructuring of our lives, both at work and at home, in the grocery store and on the farm, is needed to pull our world and our bodies back from the brink. N

JAY L. CLENDENIN / GETTY IMAGES

A RED STAR RISING OVER GERMANY

Heidi Reichinnek rescued Die Linke and helped make the party into a political force. But can she beat back Germany's ascendant far right?

CAROL SCHAEFFER



In late January 2025, a month before the German federal elections, a little-known 36-year-old politician took to the Reichstag's central podium and ignited a movement. Heidi Reichinnek had been co-leader of Die Linke for a few weeks, and until that moment, her leftist party had been written off. The elections were expected to mark Die Linke's collapse.

For weeks, the presumptive next chancellor of Germany, Friedrich Merz, had been threatening to put forward a hard-line immigration resolution "regardless of who supports it," suggesting that he would break a long-standing taboo by collaborating with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The proposal followed a string of violent holiday-season attacks by former asylum seekers.

Reichinnek had been steadily speaking out against the bill on social media, but her speech in Parliament was a crescendo.

Pounding her fist on the lectern, she declared, "We are the firewall" against the far right. Throughout her speech, Merz smirked as she appealed to Die Linke's fellow progressive parties. "To the SPD and Greens: Rule out a coalition with this union. It will only harm you. But I also say to the people out there: Don't give up but fight back, resist fascism," Reichinnek intoned as she closed her remarks. "To the barricades!"

Her speech went viral, getting around 6.5 million views on TikTok, and was shared almost 30 million times across social-media platforms. In the weeks that followed, hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets in protest, chanting, "We are the firewall!" The tagline from her speech became the slogan for a movement against the AfD and the centrist German government's willingness to accommodate its demands.

Although Merz still became chancellor, Reichinnek's party made a shocking return from the dead. Before the speech, Die Linke had been projected to garner less than 3 percent of the vote in the federal elections—below the 5 percent needed to enter Parliament. In the end, Die Linke got nearly 9 percent. It was the most popular party in Berlin and among young people: 34 percent of women voters under 25 voted for Die Linke, more than double the total for any other party.

Since then, support for Die Linke has continued to climb, and it is now tied with the Greens as Germany's fourth-largest party, behind the AfD and the current ruling coalition partners, the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In just a few months, Reichinnek became one of the most recognizable voices in German politics, and her star keeps rising. But while her party has grown, the AfD has grown even faster. In the federal election, the AfD saw its best-ever results, coming in at over 20 percent, and now the party has hit nearly 26 percent in the polls, surpassing the CDU as the most popular party in Germany.

Reichinnek finds herself in a position

Carol Schaeffer is a journalist based in Berlin and a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"The AfD is growing stronger, which is alarming. But I see people standing their ground."

Fan favorite: Heidi Reichinnek reacts to the crowd at a rally in Berlin in January 2025.

where she must build up not only her own party but, if Germany is to avoid a far-right takeover, a broader progressive movement as well.

Just hours after her speech in Parliament, Reichinnek headed to a packed hall in Kreuzberg, Berlin's hipster district. The lights were low, and the music blaring. The social-media feeds of the 700 or so mostly young Berliners in attendance had been lighting up with messages from the party for weeks.

To the tune of Taylor Swift's "…Ready for It?" and thunderous applause, Reichinnek and her party co-chair, Ines Schwerdtner, danced their way through the crowd and onto the stage. Schwerdtner, like Reichinnek, is young. Now 36, she entered politics after working as the editor in chief of *Jacobin* magazine in Germany. Photographers gathered to take pictures as the pair sauntered in, all smiles, good vibes, and bright-red lipstick. The evening's moderator, a gynecologist and queer feminist Instagram influencer known as @Gynakollege, joked to the audience, "I wish it was always like that when I show up."

The excitement was a surprise—and a sign of things to come. "Heidi had been writing to me for around two weeks, asking if we should do something together, and I said, 'Sure, we can meet in a pub with maybe 20 or 30 people,'" Schwerdtner said onstage. "But that escalated quickly, and now we're here with all of you."

"The left is back," Reichinnek told the crowd. "And we have so much we need to do."

It's Friday afternoon, a time when the offices of the Bundestag, which sits across the River Spree from the glass dome of the Reichstag, are usually quiet. Most members of Parliament have already left for their home districts, but Reichinnek is still around. Dressed in leggings and a gray sweatshirt, she's ready for her train home to Osnabrück, four hours west of Berlin. More than nine months after the speech that shot her to fame and into the Bundestag, she has settled into a routine.

"I just hope there are no big delays on the train," she says with a laugh. The slowdowns on Deutsche Bahn, Germany's beleaguered federally owned rail system, have become a memeable national embarrassment, and Reichinnek provocatively argues that it should cease operating as a for-profit company and become a public service.

In a TikTok video that racked up nearly 80,000 likes and 1,200 comments, Reichinnek lays out the Deutsche Bahn's myriad problems and bemoans that its CEO earns €2.24 million a year. "We must nationalize the rail. And until that happens, I have another idea," she says in the video. "The head of the Deutsche Bahn and the transportation minister will take no more domestic flights, no more service cars. They will have to make all of their appointments with the Deutsche Bahn. Just like you. And just like me."

If German politics had been a study in technocratic subtlety under Angela Merkel's long reign and the much shorter tenure of her successor, Olaf Scholz, then Reichinnek is offering Germany a new course curriculum. Her policy proposals are bold and bluntly delivered. Her arms are covered in tattoos, her hair deep red, and her speaking style is so rapid that TV viewers have called the networks to complain. She is a whirlwind of energy—a savior of the left, a villain for the center and the right.

On this evening in the nearly empty Bundestag, her sleeves are rolled up, exposing a tattoo of the socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, along with the quote "Your 'Order' is built on sand. The revolution says: I was, I am, I will be." Among other tattoos higher up on her arm is an image of Nefertiti in a gas mask, inspired by her time as a student of Middle Eastern politics living in Cairo during the Arab Spring.

Reichinnek is bubbly, but her smile turns steely when she speaks about the stakes of the moment. "The AfD is growing stronger, which is alarming," she tells me. "But I see people standing their ground, saying that this is not how they want the country to end."

Her office is spare, save for a small video studio set up in the corner, a reminder that many of her voters meet her through a screen. Unlike potential political corollaries in the United States like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Zohran Mamdani, both of whom came to national prominence via social media but represent local constituencies in a winner-take-all system, Reichinnek is a federal representative elected through proportional representation. More like a national delegate than a local representative, she can lead her party in Parliament without holding a direct district seat—a feature of Germany's mixed electoral system that favors coalition-building over servicing local voters.

That doesn't stop her from connecting with the grass roots, she insists: "I'm going from door to door knocking, asking, 'Hey, can I help you? We are from Die Linke. This is what we do.'" Inspired by activism in the United States and coupled with an aggressive social-media campaign, Die Linke managed to knock on 600,000 doors across the country.

But grassroots campaigning has its limits in Germany, where door-knocking is not a political norm. In Reichinnek's home district of Osnabrück, for example, the chancellor's party, the CDU, dominates, followed by its federal coalition partner, the SPD. Die Linke trails each of these parties by more than 20 points, hovering at around 11 percent of local support, which is relatively strong for the party in western Germany, where Die Linke has struggled to gain a foothold.

PREVIOUS PAGE: FRANK HAMMERSCHMIDT / PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES; LEFT: CHRISTIAN MANG / GETTY IMAGES

That struggle owes much to history. In western Germany, Die Linke still carries the stigma of its roots in the former East Germany's ruling socialist party, even after it merged with a splinter party from the Social Democrats and rebranded itself in 2007.

Despite her East German roots, Reichinnek is a child of the reunified Germany. Born in 1988 in the small town of Merseburg, she grew up in a working-class family that attended church, which was a highly surveilled and marginalized institution in the German Democratic Republic. Her mother was a chemical technician, and her father was an electrician at the Buna-Werke complex in Schkopau, a synthetic-rubber plant. After the collapse of East Germany in 1989–90, it eventually became a subsidiary of the US-based Dow Chemicals. Both of her parents, like many East Germans, embraced the end of the socialist regime. The narrative of her childhood was that reunification was a good thing.

"I was very fortunate that my parents didn't become unemployed after the fall of the Wall," Reichinnek said during a podcast produced by the newspaper *Die Zeit*. (The show ends only when the interviewee has decided that "all has been said," and her interview lasted for nearly eight hours.) "I always had that family support. That was also a political impetus for me: I wanted people who weren't so fortunate to still be supported. This requires a strong welfare state. This requires public services and social justice."

Ultimately, the forces that shaped Reichinnek's politics are not specific to any one place. Like Ocasio-Cortez and Mamdani, she belongs to a generation molded as much by global upheavals as by national and local ones. For her, economic precarity, mass migration, and democratic crises are transnational phenomena.

At the University of Halle, she studied Middle Eastern politics before earning a master's degree at Marburg University and spending a semester in Cairo during the Arab Spring. Reichinnek joined Die Linke in September 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe, while she was teaching German to newly arrived refugees. Within two years, she was on the Osnabrück City Council and serving as the state spokesperson for the official youth organization of Die Linke in Lower Saxony.

In 2019, at the age of 30, she was elected as party chair for the state, winning more than 86 percent of the delegate votes and becoming the youngest person to hold the position. If Reichinnek's worldview reflects the transnational left of her generation, the party she inherited was struggling to reconcile its East German origins with a new political landscape defined by migration, climate change, and the online left. By the time she was elected to lead Die Linke in November 2024, the party comprised elderly communists and a smattering of young *Jacobin* readers—and was polling at historic lows.

In large part, this was caused by the departure of its star, Sahra Wagenknecht, the year before. A die-hard heir of East German socialism, she had joined the GDR's Communist Party just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, hoping to prevent the state from collapsing because of what she called "counter-revolutionary forces." Wagenknecht thrilled loyalists and infuriated her critics, who saw only an unreformed nostalgia for authoritarianism.

In step: Reichinnek, Gregor Gysi, and Ines Schwerdtner at a Die Linke campaign rally in January 2025.

By 2015, as the AfD began to gain ground on an anti-immigrant platform, Wagenknecht joined its opposition to then-Chancellor Angela Merkel's *Willkommenskultur*, calling Merkel's "we can do it" stance on immigration "flippant" and "reckless." The criticism from within Die Linke of her calls for stricter asylum laws was fierce. Wagenknecht's protectionist populism divided Die Linke, and in 2023, she broke away, forming her own party, the Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), and taking with her much of Die Linke's devoted eastern base.

"We would let no one on the inside or outside of the party destroy what we have built."

Wagenknecht's departure left Die Linke alone among Germany's major parties in its unequivocal defense of asylum rights. While the CDU, SPD, BSW, and AfD called for tighter immigration controls—even the Greens compromised as part of the governing coalition that collapsed in late 2024—Die Linke drew a firm pro-migrant, anti-fascist line.

With Reichinnek as its most prominent leader, Die Linke has become the definitive voice of inclusive politics, championing queer voters as well as immigrants. But if you listen to Reichinnek's speeches, appearances, TikToks, and podcasts, you won't find much discussion about specific policies. The party does offer concrete demands—federally legalized

CHRISTIAN MANG / GETTY IMAGES

A serious party: Reichinnek celebrates in Berlin after early election results are announced in February 2025.

rent-cap legislation and a higher federal minimum wage—but these proposals function more as a political direction than as a legislative agenda. There is little appetite, internally or externally, for the politicking that could build the necessary momentum to make such policies viable.

"When Sahra left, we could start anew," Reichinnek said in November. "And we said that we would let no one on the inside or outside of the party destroy what we have built."

That does not mean that Die Linke's strategy has been without its successes. Reichinnek's viral January speech played a major role in blocking Merz's resolution calling for a "five-point plan" to dramatically restrict immigration. She has also been instrumental in pushing the conversation on Israel to the left. Die Linke was the first party to demand the immediate halt of weapons deliveries to Israel. Like all other major parties, Die Linke has affirmed Israel's right to exist, but it's also one of the few voices to criticize the Israeli government—a radical position in a country whose anxiety over antisemitism has translated to such staunch support for Israel that it was famously referred to by Merkel as Germany's *Staatsräson* ("state reason"). In August, when Germany announced that it would suspend weapons exports for use in Gaza, it marked a shift that had long been demanded by Die Linke and amplified by Reichinnek—a rare alignment between outsider pressure and government action. The suspension, however, was lifted by November 2025.

"I want to use this anger to create something positive. And that's what separates us from the right-wing party."

While immigration helped define the party after Wagenknecht decamped, this new version of Die Linke has been keen to remain focused on rent, wages, and taxing the rich. "All the other parties were talking about immigration, but we were talking about rent," Reichinnek said in November. "Anyone who wanted to talk about anything other than immigration, they came to us."

As a way to take up the issue, the party released two apps to help people assess whether they were being overcharged. Although these apps are helpful as a resource for anyone who feels they pay too much for basic living costs, they work best in major cities but fail to reach the many rural Germans who are flocking to the AfD.

Without greater parliamentary pull, which can be achieved either by gaining more seats or by forming coalitions with other parties, Die Linke's power is oppositional, not executive—the party is large enough to jam the machine, but not to steer it. It can claim few, if any, direct legislative wins.

Parliamentary systems like the one built in Germany after World War II are designed to limit the rise of charismatic leaders and encourage coalitional deal-making. Yet Die Linke is thriving not only by refusing to compromise its values but by rejecting the system itself. After the "Traffic Light" coalition—made up of the SPD, the Greens, and the centrist Free Democrats—collapsed in 2024 amid infighting, the politics of measured deliberation between parties no longer seemed to work. Die Linke has capitalized on this dysfunction. But anger at the center has been unevenly distributed: While many progressives drifted from the Greens or SPD to Die Linke, far more voters moved to the AfD, including many from Die Linke's old eastern base.

Die Linke's refusal to bend the knee, then, is both its strength and its curse. By positioning itself as morally unyielding, it offers a political

MASSIMO DI NONNO / GETTY IMAGES

home for those who are disillusioned by the deals that centrist and progressive parties have made to remain part of a governing coalition. It also means that, while "Red-Red-Green" coalitions can work at the municipal level, at the federal level the "pragmatic left" parties like the SPD and the Greens essentially view Die Linke as unfit to govern and exclude it from coalition negotiations.

As much as Reichinnek despises the right, much of her disdain is reserved for centrist progressives. When I asked her if she would work with other leftist parties, she laughed. Die Linke is Germany's only leftist party, she said, with the others being left of center, not truly on the left. "There is a possibility of progressive politics, and of course, I want my party to grow stronger, but it is not helping if, at the same time, the Greens and the SPD are getting weaker," she said. "The SPD, they need to get their shit together; they need to think about what they want to show for themselves in this coalition," she added, pointing to the SPD's campaign promise for higher minimum wages but its inability to keep such promises when the CDU rejects them.

Her reputation for acid-tongued criticism of other parties, including other progressives, has left her with numerous enemies and not many allies. Her comments angered conservative Chancellor Merz to such a degree that he and his governing party, the CDU, led an effort to block Reichinnek from taking a seat on the parliamentary committee that oversees intelligence agencies. In response, Sören Pellmann, the co-leader with Reichinnek of Die Linke's parliamentary group, told reporters, "It is questionable how the [CDU] intends to secure two-thirds majorities without Die Linke in the future."

Being too small to govern but also too popular for the other parties to ignore allows Die Linke to make demands without apology. Reichinnek cannot yet write the laws she wants, but she and her colleagues can stop the ones she doesn't. In a moment when people are weary of technocrats and half measures, obstruction can read as conviction—and, for now, conviction looks like leadership.

ODD ANDERSEN / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The biggest danger to Germany, however, is not the centrist parties or the conservative CDU—it's the rapid growth of the AfD. In November, Reichinnek said that Die Linke ultimately needed to "broaden the whole left spectrum." There are Nazis among AfD voters, she explained, and "there's barely anything you can do but contain them." But other AfD voters are simply dissatisfied with the status quo—especially many in the east whose lives became more precarious after unification. Reichinnek said it was important to tell people, "When you go and vote for a democratic party, they will better your life." But, she added, "the problem is that for decades all the parties have been lying."

"We say, 'OK, people are angry, and that's OK'—I'm angry too," she continued. "I wouldn't be a part of the left party if I weren't angry about something, but I want to use this anger to create something positive. And that's what separates us from the right-wing party. They want just more anger, more hate. They want to exclude people, and we want to include them. We want to change something, and we want to show them there is hope."

"I told her I would make her like Taylor Swift. 'I will get you an army of teenagers.' Heidi kind of scoffed."

—Felix Schulz, Reichinnek's social-media director

THE 2025 FEDERAL ELECTION WAS THE FIRST TIME IN Die Linke's history that young people played a decisive role in the party's success at the polls. After reunification, the party was predominantly made up of former functionaries, army and police officers, and state security officials. This has fundamentally changed. Even as Die Linke launched "Mission Silberlocke"—a campaign fronted by three "silver-haired" party elders to secure key constituencies in the 2024 federal election—Reichinnek became the face of the party's revival.

Skin in the game: Reichinnek has a tattoo of Rosa Luxemburg, the Marxist theorist and revolutionary.

"I came to Heidi in 2021 and told her I would make her like Taylor Swift," said Felix Schulz, Reichinnek's social-media director. "'I will get you an army of teenagers,' I told her. Heidi kind of scoffed at that and said, 'Yeah, sure.'"

A lanky, chain-smoking 33-year-old with tattoos and a mop of red hair, Schulz matches Reichinnek's sardonic energy and disregard for dusty formal politics. With a wink, he called himself Reichinnek's "minister of propaganda." Sitting in the courtyard of Die Linke's headquarters, Schulz explained that the goal of Reichinnek's messaging is to reach as many young people as possible.

"We were continually losing members. We had a big base in the former east with predominantly older voters who kept dying on us," Schulz said. "We needed to reach young women in particular, and so we needed to be on the platforms where women were."

The strategy worked. But for a party that insists it is about class, not identity, there is a tension in building so much of its appeal around a single figure and a shared aesthetic. Bead bracelets, memes, and Taylor Swift–coded inside jokes bind young supporters to Reichinnek personally. Whether that attachment can survive the compromises that governing would require is a question the party has not yet had to answer.

Above all, Schulz explained, the party wants to focus on how the AfD harms the working class. "We can often reach people by talking about what parties like the AfD actually offer in terms of social policy, in labor policy."

But given its unwavering stances, I wondered, is Die Linke a party of morals?

"No, I don't think politics is the place for morals," Schulz said. "If we were to say that, we would be the Green Party. We're not. We're the party for people who go

“I’m so excited that so many young people are joining, that they feel so seen, that I give them hope and power.”

through economic hardships. We are the party of disenfranchised people.”

The result is a strange duality. Outwardly, Die Linke presents itself as the moral firewall of the republic; internally, its own strategists insist that it’s not in the morality business at all, but in the business of material interests.

In Reichinnek’s first TikTok video in late 2021, grainy and with scratchy sound, she speaks slowly and clearly—a far cry from the breakneck speed with which she speaks in her more recent videos. Some of the videos are like blooper reels—you can hear Schulz joking in the background—which lends a casual quality to her profile. While many of her videos show her delivering a spirited rebuttal or speech in the Bundestag, in most of her videos she speaks directly to the camera.

“She’s a youth worker—she knows how to talk to young people. She knows how to talk to disenfranchised people,” Schulz said. “Heidi just works in short-form video.”

They also “try to make all of her videos with language that can be understood at a fifth-grade level,” he added.

This is in stark contrast to Wagenknecht, who cultivated a sleek intellectual image and a signature polished look: a jacket with padded shoulders, a knee-length skirt, and pumps.

Reichinnek is much messier. Schulz likes to talk about her appeal as a combination of “freak, cheat, and familiar.”

She is a “freak” for her tattoos, the speed with which she talks, her love of heavy metal, and her informal, often mildly expletive-laden and freestyled speeches in Parliament. She is a “cheat” because, unlike many other politicians, she does not come from law or the private sector but from the world of social work, assisting refugees and young people. And she’s “familiar” because of how well she’s cultivated an aura of accessibility.

Reichinnek’s appeal also taps into something far beyond German politics. From Washington, DC, to Berlin, as old parties weaken and social media turns politics into performance, familiar figures appear: the strongman, yes, but also the charismatic young socialist. Reichinnek is a local expression of an emerging global type, and she faces the same dilemma that confronts members of the contemporary left elsewhere. She must wrestle with how a left party can reconcile its identity as both a protest movement and a political vehicle. The question for Reichinnek and her peers is no longer only what the left wants. It is whether it intends to rule or merely to rage.

Pride: Reichinnek at the Christopher Street Day parade in Leipzig in June 2025.

On a rainy July evening in Schwaan, a village of around 5,000 near Germany’s northern coast, Reichinnek arrived to support a Die Linke mayoral candidate. Around 50 people showed up—a respectable turnout given that only months earlier, the party worried it could not fill a pub in Berlin.

Lucy, 21 and Artur, 25, had taken the train from nearby Rostock just to see Reichinnek. “She is one of the first politicians who managed to convince me and who creates a politics that I feel fully a part of,” Artur said, thumbing a CD of his metal band that he hoped to slip her.

Teenagers hovered, waiting for selfies, with some offering handmade bead bracelets, a ritual borrowed from Taylor Swift fandom that has become a miniature youth movement in itself. Reichinnek wears them like talismans on the Bundestag floor and says the box in which she stores them is overflowing.

That day, she wore bracelets with green beads to match her green shirt that spelled out “Mad Woman,” “Enchanted,” and “*Mietendeckel*”—the rent-cap proposal at the center of Die Linke’s platform. She talked about building power from the ground up, not as a slogan but as the testimony of someone who once spent weekends in community centers, teaching German to new arrivals and convincing teens to get involved.

“I’m so excited that so many young people are joining, that they feel so seen, that I give them hope and power,” Reichinnek told me. “That’s all very cool, but on the other hand, there’s the question: Can I fulfill everything they hope from me? I don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

The next afternoon, at a small riverside cookout, the mood was even gentler. Families milled around or sat with plates balanced on their laps. Reichinnek moved slowly through the crowd, her sleeves pushed up, chatting, laughing, listening. In a quiet moment, she tied her hair back and straightened her shoulders, as if bracing for combat.

In a village that most Germans will never visit, she briefly looked like what she wants politics to let her be: a local organizer trying to keep people from giving up on each other and a fighter ready to battle the far right, revive a party, and reassure a frightened generation. But whether Germany’s left can grow will help decide not only Die Linke’s future but how much space remains for the far right.

Standing on the bank of the river, she filmed a short video. Between takes, she thumbed one of her Swiftie bead bracelets. “I have one that says in German, ‘Do it for us.’ This is the one I always wear when I’m really frustrated,” Reichinnek said. “OK, I’ll do it for you.” N

SEBASTIAN WILLNOW / PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES

(Dana, continued from page 33)

The December 2025 attack on a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach, which killed 15 people in the deadliest antisemitic violence in Australian history, tested this position under the most extreme circumstances. The Jewish Council condemned the massacre unequivocally while rejecting "weaponising the Bondi massacre to push bigotry, hatred and division." Max Kaiser, a cofounder of the council, called the remarks by Australia's antisemitism envoy linking pro-Palestinian protests to the shooting "highly irresponsible." The council's position—that genuine antisemitism must be fought without abandoning solidarity with Palestinians—represents the critical ground these new Jewish formations are trying to hold: rejecting both the violence done to Jews and the instrumentalization of that violence to silence criticism of Israel.

MARK KERRISON / IN PICTURES VIA GETTY IMAGES

While these movements are similar, what unites them is not a single political program but a shared refusal to let the Israeli state define what Jewish identity means. They are recovering, whether consciously or not, something Birnbaum understood when he moved from Zionism to diaspora nationalism to religious anti-Zionism. Each of his phases represented a different answer to what Jews owed the world and what the world owed Jews, and each took seriously the possibility that territorial sovereignty might not be the answer at all.

These groups also recognize the binding role of tradition in building organized institutions that embody different answers to the question of what Jewish life should look like. The congregation Tzedek Chicago celebrates Sukkot by gathering oak and sumac leaves from local trees rather than the four species traditionally grown in Israel. The substitution is deliberate. Rabbi Brant Rosen calls this approach "Diasporism," a conscious immersion in local culture that treats the land where Jews actually live as home rather than as exile.

Jewish Voice for Peace, another group in the United States that has gained significant sway and members in recent years, speaks of constructing a "Judaism beyond Zionism," meaning synagogues, study groups, and ritual communities whose identity does not depend on an attachment to any state. The practical implications extend beyond liturgy. These groups argue that thriving diaspora life is not a deficiency awaiting a territorial cure but a legitimate form of Jewish existence that predates and will outlast the current crisis—and is, in fact, necessary to resolving it.

Israel's existence was meant to have resolved the centuries-old debate about whether Jews could thrive as a distinct people in a world of nation-states. But as the last decades have made painfully evident, territorial sovereignty has offered no escape from nationalism's violence; it simply shifted its terrain.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 181(II), titled "Future Government of Palestine." The document emerged from the Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, which proposed to partition the land into separate Jewish and Arab states. At the precise moment when Europe's great powers declared the Jewish Question answered, they formally created another. The resolution offered an answer to a problem Palestinians had not created and didn't seek. Palestinians have always known the two questions were inseparable. Most Jews refused to see it.

Palestinians did not require a UN resolution to understand what they were experiencing. Zionism's answer to the Jewish Question was their catastrophe. When Israel declared independence in 1948, the event Palestinians call the *Nakba* displaced roughly 750,000 people from their homes. What one people celebrated as statehood, another experienced as destruction.

Some Jews understood this connection from Zionism's earliest stirrings. Birnbaum recognized that a movement built on the idea that Jewish existence required justification would produce a state that demanded justification from others. But in recent decades, most diaspora Jews have refused to hold both histories in view. It has proven easier to treat Israel as one story and Palestine as another.

The genocide in Gaza has made that separation impossible. In claiming to resolve Jewish vulnerability, Zionism produced Palestinian dispossession, and now the two questions are permanently bound together, helixed by the violent history that joined them. This is what the movements emerging across the diaspora have begun to understand, even when they cannot always articulate it. The fates of the two peoples are now intertwined, which means any honest reckoning with one question requires reckoning with the other.

Echoes from the past: A sign held during a rally organized by Na'amod UK calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The Palestinians killed in Gaza are not collateral damage in Israel's self-defense but the latest victims of a question that should never have been asked. Every bomb that falls on Rafah demonstrates that the cure is also the disease. A movement that accepted the premise of Jewish abnormality and sought statehood as a remedy has produced a state that enacts abnormality upon others.

Now the two questions are permanently bound together, helixed by the violent history that joined them.

What Birnbaum finally grasped was that the question itself was the trap. To ask how Jews could be acceptable was to accept that they required justification. The same logic now confronts Palestinians who are asked to prove their worthiness for rights that should need no proof. The Jews walking away from Zionism are rejecting both frames. They are proposing an identity that doesn't need to be defended through domination. The answer to what it means to be Jewish need not come at Palestinian expense. N

Four years after Russia launched its full-scale invasion, Ukrainian health workers are

Curled up on her side, Anastasiia smiles at her midwife, Karina, as she rests between contractions. Her labor had begun slowly the night before, but now 24-year-old Nastia has traded her clothes for a blue paper gown and settled into the room where she will deliver her child, a boy she plans to name Robert. Listening to the thrum of her son's heartbeat on the fetal monitor, Nastia chats with Karina as her husband, Edward, changes into a pair of scrubs.

"Frankly, I adore this woman," Nastia says, gesturing to her midwife. "So I can relax and feel all right with these people."

Even the night before, in the midst of her first contractions, when explosions echoed across the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, Nastia says she felt safe: "Birth, it's the most scary thing. People get used to the war."

While Nastia labors, doctors and nurses tend to two dozen patients at the maternity ward of Kharkiv Hospital No. 25, less than 20 miles from the Russian border. Down the hall, 39-year-old Iryna consults with her doctor about methods to prevent a preterm birth due to her cervix shortening at 30 weeks' gestation. "We turn on calm music very loudly" at night to drown out the sounds of war, says Iryna, who lives with her husband and their three children. Elsewhere, new mom and soldier Olena cradles her daughter Sofiia after an emergency cesarean—performed after Olena developed preeclampsia. Her doctor notes that they'll keep her in the ward for another three days, to give her incision time to heal before sending her home. Mothers in her condition receive home visits from UNICEF-supported nurses around the country.

In another part of the ward, 22-year-old Anna waits for an ultrasound to monitor the amount of amniotic fluid in her uterus—currently less than her doctors would like. "I would like to give birth, of course, in an underground maternity hospital," she says. That is, a maternity ward in a bomb shelter.

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Inside Ukraine's Underground Maternity Wards

CECILIA NOWELL

shoring up maternity care to protect the most vulnerable—and preserve Ukrainian identity.

Her desire is understandable: Just a few months earlier, in July 2025, Russian forces struck a nearby maternity hospital in Kharkiv. And as Anna speaks, in October 2025, news appears on social media that a Russian drone has demolished a kindergarten in the area. That afternoon, at the site of the former nursery, now a mess of glass and metal, a firefighter describes pulling children from the bomb shelter where they had taken cover. All 48 survived the strike.

When Iryna Borzenko, an obstetrician-gynecologist, arrived at Hospital No. 25 in April, after it had merged with the nearby regional hospital where she'd been working for years, building an underground maternity ward quickly became one of her first priorities, she says. During air raids, Borzenko, now chief of the hospital's neonatal-care unit, would help patients into the hallway—which is safer than the rooms, where shattering windows can cause shrapnel injuries—or down to the building's bomb shelter if they could walk. But there is no way to move a woman in active labor, to pause a cesarean section, or to relocate a newborn on a ventilator. "Most women asked us about [an underground bomb] shelter and 'Can we give birth in shelter?'" she says.

In October, Borzenko began to see that vision realized, when contractors started to transform an existing 800-square-meter concrete bomb shelter into a fully functional maternity unit, which they expect to complete by the spring of 2026, with the support of the government of Ireland and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN's sexual-and-reproductive-health agency. UNFPA had already contributed to two similar renovations in the border cities of Kherson and Sumy, reflecting a rising trend of underground care in modern warfare.

Even after Russia and Ukraine began negotiating a peace agreement, maternal-healthcare providers and reproductive-rights groups continued advocating to shore up access to care for the predominantly working-class families, mostly unenlisted women, who remain along the front lines. Amid a

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“Women are under tremendous stress, and then they’re also thinking, ‘Where am I going to deliver my baby?’”

—Jacqueline Mahon, UN Population Fund

colonial war being waged over natural resources, land, and heritage, Ukraine’s efforts to fortify its maternity hospitals have become a way to protect the most vulnerable—and preserve Ukrainian identity. “We all hope for the best, but what should we do?” Borzenko says, acknowledging that women deserve a safe place to give birth, war or no war. She spoke from the construction zone, wearing a neon safety vest over her scrubs, as she gestured toward the former storage space that will soon become patient rooms, a wearable blood-pressure monitor that her children gave her fastened to her wrist. With the new shelter, “it will be possible for every woman” who arrives at the hospital and wants to give birth underground “to do it here.”

When Russia escalated its invasion of Ukraine four years ago, some of the first images to emerge from the conflict were of devastated maternity wards. On March 2, 2022, a mother gave birth in an underground bomb shelter in Zhytomyr right after a Russian missile hit the facility. Days later, photographs of an ashen pregnant woman being evacuated on a stretcher began circulating after the maternity hospital in Mariupol was bombed. The woman and her child later died.

Although those images have faded from public view, particularly as peace negotiations ramped up, Russia’s attacks continue. Even after a peace deal is reached, Ukrainians will be recovering from the effects of the war for some time—and they’re hesitant to believe that Russia will abide by any ceasefire. The World Bank estimates that the cost of reconstruction will be at least $524 billion, with at least $19.4 billion needed to rebuild Ukraine’s healthcare sector, which has been the subject of more than 2,700 air strikes. More than 80 of those attacks targeted maternity hospitals and neonatal facilities, according to UNFPA, including strikes that occurred during peace negotiations.

President Trump meets with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House in October 2025.

Ukraine is also suffering a demographic crisis the likes of which it has never seen before, as a falling birth rate coincides with a high rate of battlefield deaths and an exodus of refugees fleeing the country. In 2024, the most recent year for which data is available, Ukraine recorded the lowest birth rate—and the highest mortality rate—of any country in the world. According to UNFPA, Ukraine’s maternal-mortality rate increased 37 percent between 2023 and 2024. Pregnancy-related diseases have increased as well: From 2023 to 2024, the rate of hypertensive disorders, such as preeclampsia, rose 12 percent, and uterine ruptures went up by 44 percent. In 2023, the Ukrainian government recorded a nationwide preterm-birth rate of 6 percent, but frontline cities reported higher rates, such as 11.8 percent in Kherson. In part as a result of those figures, the national cesarean-section rate is now 28.7 percent—which is far above the World Health Organization’s recommended limit of 10 to 15 percent and is even higher in frontline cities like Kherson, where it’s 46 percent, and Kharkiv, where it’s around 34 percent.

Borzenko cites stress as the leading culprit behind the higher rates of pregnancy complications. Jacqueline Mahon, the UNFPA representative to Ukraine, also notes the consequences of the war on women. “Women are under tremendous stress,” she says, “not just for themselves” but for their pregnancies, their families, their elderly parents, their partners fighting on the front lines, “and then they’re also thinking about, ‘Where am I going to deliver my baby?’”

Studies examining pregnancy during wartime show that exposure to prenatal stress raises cortisol levels, which increases the likelihood of complications like gestational diabetes, hypertension, preeclampsia, miscarriage, premature labor, and low birth weight. In Kharkiv, Borzenko says, a majority of the patients who utilize Ukraine’s universal-healthcare system to see her are “people who have now lost their homes and the opportunity to earn money,” internally displaced people who cannot escape that stress. “That is,” she adds, “the most vulnerable segment of the population.”

Yet global funding for reproductive-healthcare programs, including those that support maternity hospitals in Ukraine, is in free fall. Since Donald Trump began his second term as president, the United States—once the largest provider of global aid—has announced its withdrawal from the World Health Organization; ordered the incineration of a $10 million stockpile of contraceptives destined for low-income countries; and revoked $377 million in funding for UNFPA, $15 million of which was destined for Ukraine.

As Ukraine takes in the effects of any proposed peace deal and what it might mean for reconstruction, the United States’ support will be sorely missed in the efforts to train more midwives, create safe spaces for women to report gender-based violence, and build secure facilities for them to give birth. Construction on facilities like the underground maternity ward in Kharkiv represents a critical step toward protecting women and young families in a war zone.

One hundred miles north of Kharkiv, still just 20 miles from the ever-shifting front line, another woman named Anastasiia waits to give birth.

Lying on a twin-size bed in a room with eight other expectant mothers, 25-year-old Anastasiia cradles her belly as she talks about her decision to wait at the Sumy City Perinatal Hospital’s underground maternity ward—a 20-bed facility

AARON SCHWARTZ / SIPA / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

Pregnant patients have sheltered in hospital basements as Russian drone and missile strikes could be heard overhead.

ERIN TRIEB / *BLOOMBERG* VIA GETTY IMAGES

that the hospital began building in 2023 and that the UN helped equip with medications and other supplies—until she gives birth.

She made it to the 39th week of her pregnancy at home in Okhtyrka, a town 50 miles away marked by the bombed-out skeletons of buildings. Russian forces had pummeled the city, previously home to an oil depot and a military base, with cluster munitions, rockets, and a vacuum bomb in early 2022. In the first month of the 2022 invasion, half of the community's residents fled. Anastasiia, studying at a university in nearby Poltava, returned to be with her parents, and her father joined the military. After learning of the hospital's underground maternity ward, Anastasiia decided to return to wait out the rest of her pregnancy in the safety of the shelter. "We have missiles and drones flying in all the time, so you get used to it," she says, but she admits her fears were worse during this pregnancy. "The first thing you worry about is the child, and it's very scary."

Adding to her fears, shortly after Anastasiia arrived at the facility, a maternity hospital on the other side of town was bombed while 160 people were sheltering in its basement.

Anastasiia is far from the only woman in the Sumy region who was concerned enough to seek shelter at the underground maternity ward. Here, the women rest in two rooms, filled with rows of up to 20 standard hospital beds, venturing across the hall to an examination room for ultrasounds and other appointments. The bunkerized maternity unit is brightly lit; the only sign that it was once used for storage and maintenance is the overhead pipes that run through the hallway. With no windows to peer out of, and insulated from the aboveground noise, the women chat with one another about their coming children.

"It's a very nice and cozy atmosphere here, because all around there are other pregnant women and they have similar questions regarding pregnancy and motherhood," Anastasiia says.

Not every woman living along the front lines can make it to such a facility for regular appointments, however. So Ukrainian midwives, ob-gyns, and paramedics also go to them.

In the early days of the full-scale invasion, when some of the 265,000 women who were pregnant at the time began wondering what they would do if they weren't able to make it to a hospital to give birth, Ukrainian foundations like Safe Birth UA began producing instructional videos and brochures about how to have a safe birth outside of a medical facility, and midwives prepared to attend home births in their communities. But data from Ukraine's Health Ministry shows that very few were actually unable to make it to a hospital, even in frontline areas. In 2024, only 174 live births occurred outside a health center, about 0.10 percent of that year's 178,091 total. That number is similar to rates from other years since before the war escalated in 2022—about 0.12 percent in 2023 and 0.16 percent the year before.

"We have missiles and drones flying in all the time. The first thing you worry about is the child."

—Anastasiia, who sought care at an underground ward

From her base in Sumy, 60-year-old midwife Halyna Ivakhno and her team drive a UNFPA-equipped mobile





Maternity patients at Kharkiv Hospital No. 25 in October 2025 (clockwise from left): Olena, 37 weeks pregnant; Anna, 35 weeks pregnant; Olena, cradling her newborn; Anastasiia, resting between contractions; and Iryna, 30 weeks pregnant.

maternity unit to the smaller communities that fill the countryside. The ambulance-like vehicle is equipped with a gynecological chair, ultrasound, colposcope, medications—and Halyna's flak jacket and Kevlar helmet, which she wears only along roads where one can expect to encounter drones. When she arrives in the neighboring towns, she is sure to share information about gender-based violence between blood glucose tests and pelvic exams. Midwives like Halyna have become increasingly critical in communities where workforce shortages, intensified by the war and the relocation of doctors, have made physicians scarce. They typically work in hospitals alongside ob-gyns, although a newly formed Ukrainian Association of Midwives is advocating to expand their ability to practice independently. Even with a peace deal on the table, doctors may be slow to return to the frontline regions, where unexploded landmines are omnipresent and locals fear the next Russian strike.

Back in Kharkiv, Vitalii Kucher, an ob-gyn, joins a team on board a similar mobile maternity unit. When he began traveling out of the city with such teams in January 2023, their first goal was to reach communities in formerly occupied areas, where residents had gone without healthcare for months. "There were a lot of people we did not expect, which once again proves that the need for our trips is very great," he says, describing his surprise at finding women and children still living in cities that had been overtaken by Russian forces. Data from occupied and de-occupied territories is difficult to come by, but at the height of the invasion in early 2022, Russia occupied more than a quarter of all Ukrainian land.

Midwives have become increasingly critical in communities where workforce shortages have made physicians scarce.

During that period, medics in Kharkiv continued to respond to calls for help from deeper along the front line, including from a maternity hospital in Sloviansk, in Ukraine's battle-weary Donetsk region. In early 2025, Maryna Tashian, a paramedic with the Kharkiv Emergency and Catastrophe Department, responded to a call to retrieve a one-pound, 10-ounce preterm baby from that frontline hospital. Despite the threat of first-person-view drones (which are equipped with onboard cameras that allow the operator to immediately bomb or fly into their target), she and her colleagues made such trips two to four times a month, using the ambulance's ventilator and incubator to keep newborns alive.

She says they put all thoughts of the drones aside: "We [didn't] think about it—this is our work. The main thing for us is the child."

Two floors above the Sumy maternity ward's underground shelter, new mom Viktoriia stands vigil beside a bassinet holding her 3-day-old daughter, Solomiia. As the other mothers visiting their newborns in the room whisper to their children, 27-year-old Viktoriia gently rubs Solomiia's arm.

"She's moving," Viktoriia says with pride. She and her husband have been talking to Solomiia, stroking her back and giving her gentle massages while she receives treatment in the neonatal intensive-care unit. Such facilities are integrated into maternal and regional hospitals around the country, including here and at a regional hospital in Kharkiv.

Born at 33 weeks' gestation, Solomiia weighed a mere three pounds, eight ounces, at birth and required treatment for pneumonia and jaundice. Although she's the only newborn

CECILIA NOWELL (5)

in the ward lying under a blue light, to help clear the jaundice-causing bilirubin from her system, Solomiia is not the only baby fighting off pneumonia and struggling to gain weight. The oldest child in the ward—in this case referring to gestation rather than date of birth—was delivered at 35 weeks of pregnancy. All of the four babies in the six-bed unit had underdeveloped lungs at birth or are clearing a case of pneumonia.

Before 2022, Ukraine's Health Ministry ran a program that treated neonatal respiratory-distress syndrome, says ob-gyn Olha Butenko, the medical head of the Sumy City Perinatal Center. After Russia began its 2022 invasion and Ukraine directed much of its government resources to the war effort, the program closed—and UNFPA and other humanitarian agencies stepped up to supply frontline hospitals with the expensive medication that Butenko says the majority of babies born here now need. It's difficult to predict whether Ukraine will be in a financial position to resume the program once a peace deal is reached.

When the air-alert siren sounds, signaling an incoming drone or ballistic missile, Viktoriia and the other mothers visiting their newborns step into the hallway. All Ukrainians are familiar with the two-wall protocol: moving at least two walls away from the outside of a building, away from any windows, to avoid shattering glass. But they can't move their babies, all of whom are hooked up to ventilators or other medical equipment.

"We had a lot of thoughts about it" at the start of the invasion, Butenko says, offering a stark reminder of why birthing in a bomb shelter still has limitations. Because the newborns required equipment that could not be moved underground—oxygen is highly hazardous to operate in a bunker—hospital staff decided to keep the newborns in the aboveground ward and to cover its windows with wood and coat any glass walls with a protective lining.

"It's scary, of course, when you hear explosions, you hear things flying," Viktoriia says. She says she's grown used to it to some extent, but "when you have kids, it is scarier for both of you."

The neonatal ICU is staffed by Sumy locals who could have fled the region in 2022 but decided to stay and provide care to their neighbors instead. Valeriia Yankovska, a 37-year-old neonatal intensive-care physician and mother of two, balances her fears for her own children with her concern for others if she were to leave. Serhii Chyrva, a 36-year-old ultrasound technician and father, left Sumy for seven days at the start of the full-scale invasion to deliver his family to the relative safety of western Ukraine before returning to the hospital where he has worked for a decade. Butenko herself is a mother caring for an elderly parent whose home was destroyed in a drone strike in October.

The medical staff at her hospital is mostly "educated, and this is their choice to stay here to provide their help," Butenko says. But, she notes, skilled workers who have the opportunity to work in other parts of the region, "they are not here."

When the air-alert siren sounds, mothers can't move their babies, who are hooked up to ventilators or other medical equipment.

Viktoriia is one of the many residents whose economic stability was upended by the war. Raised in the nearby village of Krasnopillya, six miles from the Russian border, Viktoriia quit her job when the shelling intensified in early 2025. "I moved in March, and during my pregnancy I was with my sister in the village," she says, referring to Okhtyrka.

Like many other women who live along the front lines, she downplays the role that stress may have played in her preterm birth. Solomiia "probably wanted to be here earlier," she quips.

"In 2025, people who are here, we just live here," Butenko says. "We will hear the Shaheed [drones] and we'll keep sleeping." At the same time, she acknowledges that every neighborhood in Sumy has been shelled.

As peace negotiations remain ongoing, frontline providers like Borzenko say they have observed an increase in shelling and attacks on energy infrastructure, leading to frequent and prolonged outages that affect electricity, heat, and water supplies. This complicates the construction of the new underground maternity ward, not to mention that, Borzenko says, "the number of births is not decreasing, despite the threat." Women seek to give birth in the safest possible conditions, and for some that means going underground. N

The reporting in this story was supported by Women on the Ground: Reporting From Ukraine's Unseen Frontlines, an initiative of the International Women's Media Foundation. Liubov Sholudko contributed reporting and translation support.

CECILIA NOWELL

Anastasiia, 24, rests between contractions while her midwife, Karina, places an IV at Kharkiv Hospital No. 25.

Battery Ghosts

NICOLAS NIARCHOS

The supply chain for lithium-ion batteries is haunted by the phantoms of colonialism.

THE 20TH CENTURY WAS POWERED BY OIL. BUT IN THE SECOND DECADE OF the 21st century, we have myriad ways to store power without using fossil fuels. Among these methods, lithium-ion batteries now dominate. Batteries are globalized products—they are built from materials mined in one place, refined in another, assembled somewhere else, and eventually sold in yet another, crisscrossing a multitude of borders in the process. Without globalization, it would be impossible to build them or the computers, phones, and cars that they power.

Understanding these batteries and how they are made is key to understanding how a new form of power is being created, one that is measurable not only in volts but in dollars and strategic influence.

As with oil, battery power can become political power. Lithium-ion batteries have been a major factor in making Elon Musk the richest man in the world. Musk became one of the most influential people in US politics after putting upwards of $288 million into the 2024 election, buying himself a seat at the table of governance—only to flame out a few months into Trump's second term, partly over disagreements concerning electric-vehicle policy.

At the bottom of this new global supply chain are the workers who toil for pennies to extract the lithium, cobalt, nickel, and other materials without which the batteries that power modern life could not exist. These materials often come from poor countries, where workers are exploited, land rights are not respected, and human rights are violated. So places like Chile, Indonesia, Western Sahara, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have become

Nicolas Niarchos is the author of The Elements of Power: A Story of War, Technology, and the Dirtiest Supply Chain on Earth *(Penguin Press, 2026).*

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the major sources for the metals that power our devices.

This is the story of one of those places: Congo, the site of some of the worst horrors of the modern metal-extraction economy—and where an alternative, and more moral, economics might be identified.

Understanding batteries and how they are made is key to understanding how a new form of power is being created.

In Congo, perhaps more than in any other country, geology and colonization have been crucial factors in shaping the supply chain that is in use today. Without Congo, which produces 70 percent of the world's cobalt and has huge lithium reserves as well, the battery revolution would have been much slower.

Over the past six years, I have been investigating the battery conundrum for my new book, *The Elements of Power*. And I've kept returning to the question of Congo: Why is a country so rich in minerals still so poor? How can it be that Congo, the place that people say will power the green, fossil-fuel-free future, remains so defined by its colonial history?

Tunnel vision: A man enters the Shinkolobwe cobalt mine in southeastern Congo.

In 1885, Belgium's King Leopold II colonized Congo. He promised that he would bestow charity upon the country and bring it to "civilization," but he ended up slaughtering an estimated 10 million people in a drive to extract ivory, rubber, and precious metals.

By the final decade of the 19th century, the invention of the bicycle and the automobile had led to a boom in the demand for rubber. (Synthetic rubber would not be invented until 1909.) Rubber is slow to grow on plantations, but Congo's forests were full of the vines. Soon, European overseers were press-ganging local men into harvesting rubber. If they refused to work, their wives and children were kidnapped as collateral.

After Leopold colonized Congo, entire villages were enslaved in the quest for rubber, and mutilation and murder were used to enforce loyalty. One particularly haunting image from the period shows a man named Nsala staring at a severed hand and foot on the ground. "He hadn't made his rubber quota for the day so the Belgian-appointed overseers had cut off his daughter's hand and foot," wrote Judy Pollard Smith, the biographer of Lady Alice Seeley Harris, the photographer who took the image. "Her name was Boali. She was five years old. Then they killed her. But they weren't finished. Then they killed his wife too…. Leopold had not given any thought to the idea that these African children, these men and women, were our fully human brothers, created equally by the same Hand that had created his own lineage of European Royalty."

The Belgians masterminded the use of corporate structures to carry out this plunder, harnessing not only the greed of their countrymen but that of shareholders in Europe and around the world. As a truly global product, rubber tires were the lithium-ion batteries of their day.

The shareholders' need for a constant stream of profit is what drove the men who colonized Congo to wipe out its elephants and jungles, enslave its population, and tear open its earth. Companies were created for commerce: There were companies for manufacturing, companies for railroads, companies for mining, and subcompanies for general stores and agricultural products.

Some of the companies founded during this era were the forebears of successful European businesses that still exist today. Umicore, a publicly traded Belgian-French materials technology and recycling company that had a market capitalization of nearly €5 billion in 2026 (and the stated ambition to become a "sustainability champion"), has its roots in Union Minière, one of Leopold's firms.

A snapshot of Union Minière's many-tentacled ownership structure in 1960, on the eve of Congo's independence, shows just what octopuses such corporations had evolved into since their inception in the late 19th century. There was the "General Public," i.e., the shareholders; Tanganyika Concessions, a British firm that shared an interlocking board with Union Minière; and Société Générale, Belgium's premier investment bank (which was so powerful at one point that it was called "the uncrowned queen of Belgium"). The structure was designed to be complicated and opaque in order to protect the people who ultimately benefited from the extraction of Congo's minerals.

After the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the country's first democratically elected leader, in 1961, Congo was left in the grip of rulers like Mobutu Sese Seko, who used the country's immense natural resources as a personal piggy bank and took advantage of the colonial corporate architecture to plunder it. Little has changed since Mobutu fell in 1997: The web of companies that corrupt politicians and businessmen have created in the 21st century in their quest for profits from the extraction of battery metals has an uncanny resemblance to Union Minière's tentacular structure from the 1960s.

SCHALK VAN ZUYDAM / AP PHOTO

That greed may seem inevitable—as unstoppable as the relentless evolution of cell-phone technology and the profiteering that extends from it.

But could the metals that power the modern age help Congo, rather than condemn it to an endless "resource curse"? Maybe we don't need to leave Congo's cobalt in the ground. Maybe, as the green-energy revolution proceeds, Congo's wealth of resources could actually benefit the country.

Sustainable mining has been demonstrated in plenty of places around the world—in Australia and Tanzania, for instance. And my experience reporting at several mines in southern Congo has shown me how mining can be carried out in a modern manner, with an emphasis on safety, even in the poorest and historically most exploited countries.

A trip to the southern town of Bunkeya in 2022 showed me how Congolese people—and, by extension, people living close to critical-metals mines around the world—can build better places to live by responsibly developing the resources beneath their feet.

Bunkeya is still governed by a descendant of Msiri, a king whom the Belgians killed in 1891 before invading Congo's mine-rich south. Remarkably, despite the years of violence and colonialism, Bunkeya has maintained a strong sense of community. And the people of Bunkeya have managed to funnel their portion of the royalties from the nearby Tenke Fungurume Mine (one of the largest copper and cobalt mines in the world) not into some corrupt pockets, but into local agriculture, the construction of infrastructure, and the production of safe drinking water. To be sure, this money is only a small portion of the money made at Tenke Fungurume, but civil-society leaders took me through the numbers and showed me how the local *mwami*, or traditional king, had ensured that the community would be given its share of the mineral wealth before it could be stolen. According to them, the *mwami* had accomplished this through a campaign of vigorous advocacy in Kinshasa, Congo's capital city.

What made it even more remarkable was that, elsewhere, that money was being stolen. In August 2021, the government in Kinshasa began an investigation into Tenke Fungurume to ascertain the true size of the reserves and whether China Molybdenum, or CMOC, a behemoth Chinese mining firm, owed the state money. After Congo suspended the firm's mining rights in 2022, CMOC agreed to a settlement in April 2023. The firm had to pay $800 million over six years and a minimum of $1.2 billion in dividends over the mine's operational life and said that it expected the money to "play a stronger role in promoting economic development and job creation."

Yet a senior US official, who asked that his name not be used because he was not authorized to speak on the record, told me that whatever was being paid was being poorly spent or "put into pockets" and stolen.

Fit for a king: The current *mwami* of Bunkeya, Mwenda Bantu Kaneranera Godefroid Munongo Jr., on the anniversary of his coronation.

I had arrived in Bunkeya in July on the anniversary of the *mwami*'s coronation, one of two yearly celebrations in the territory. I parked outside in the town square, crossed the main street, Boulevard Msiri, and walked through the red-and-white-painted gates of the royal enclosure of Mwenda Bantu Kaneranera Godefroid Munongo Jr., the current *mwami*. Unusually for Congo, there were few beggars. I heard drumming and gunshots ahead of me as I passed a series of miniature thatched huts—homes for the spirits of each of the *mwami*'s ancestors.

In a tented courtyard, Munongo sat on a throne wearing white robes as his ceremonial bodyguards, in red tunics, fired ancient muskets into the air. Someone told me that the guards' guns date back to the colonial era. Traditional chiefs from around the country and African aristocrats—a sultan from Chad, a king from Ghana, and a chief from the Republic of the Congo—lined up to salute the *mwami* and give him gifts.

> Here was a community that showed that money from cobalt could benefit the poorest in Congo.

Afterward, a foreign agriculture expert explained to me how farming had been improved by the king, how he'd constructed clinics and roads, and that he was even thinking about building a model mine on a hill outside Bunkeya. Here was a community that stood in stark opposition to what was happening in many other places in southern Congo, where big companies

NICOLAS NIARCHOS

All mine: Some of the approximately 4,000 artisanal miners digging for copper at the Ruashi mine in Congo.

PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON / GETTY IMAGES

and anarchic profit seekers were tearing the social and physical fabric of towns apart—a community that showed that money from cobalt could benefit the poorest in the country.

In a way, Bunkeya has been lucky: there are few mines in the immediate vicinity of the town, which means there are fewer opportunities for the kind of gangsterism that has plagued other parts of southern Congo, where minerals mined in appalling circumstances are trafficked by Congolese and foreign groups. What's more, the people there have retained a strong sense of their own culture, something that has been stamped out elsewhere in the region.

This is not coincidental. European colonialists sought to deny the history of Africans and encouraged a view of the continent's populations as people in need of civilizing influences. As the development scholar Kevin C. Dunn has written of Congo, "External actors have frequently attempted to characterize the country as divided, chaotic, and lacking the ability of self-articulation, which in turn has allowed external actors to speak for it."

Such characterizations allowed the slave trade to flourish along the coast of West Africa and later allowed explorers to claim huge swaths of land for European monarchs. The parallels with today are plain to see, in the condescension with which Westerners speak about Africa and Africans, in the ignorance of African affairs that is demonstrated by US and European powers, and in the treatment of African workers by their Chinese bosses.

> The deletion of African history was essential to establish mastery over people in the colonies.

Writing for *The New York Review of Books* in 2018, the journalist Howard W. French noted that one of the key rhetorical moves among supporters of colonialism has been "emphasizing the civilizational virtues that are being shared with less fortunate or explicitly inferior peoples, while minimizing one's own self-interested objectives and downplaying the violence and dispossession that are usually essential to the subjugation of others." The deletion of African history was essential to this project, French said, to establish mastery over people in the colonies. Any evidence of ancient civilization was ascribed to external influences. "To accord local agency in such matters would have undermined a long-standing narrative about the inherent inferiority or even subhuman nature of Africans, which was vital in giving Europeans license for their actions."

What I saw in Bunkeya flies in the face of such license. In some ways, the community always has: Msiri resisted colonial rule there in the 1880s (even though, as scholars like Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja have pointed out, Msiri was not native to the land; he came from central Tanzania). These days, under his distant descendant, Bunkeya is trying once again to break free, resisting the control that has been foisted upon it since Msiri was murdered.

To be sure, most places in southern Congo aren't like Bunkeya. Most places have been built on the buried dreams of miners and a painful history of exploitation. Sometimes, they have literally been built on human bodies.

On one of my early trips to Congo, I spoke with Charlotte "Maman Ocean" Cime Jinga,

a jovial parliamentarian who once served as mayor of the city of Kolwezi. She complained about how corruption was crippling her country and how cavalier the government was with miners' lives—and their deaths.

The bodies of the artisanal miners who died after a recent cave-in had been unceremoniously dumped, she told me. "There is a mass grave, unmarked," she said. Officially, 43 people had suffocated or been crushed to death, but she contended that there had been many, many more. To lower the reported death toll, officials had ordered trenches to be dug at the city cemetery, and the bodies of those whose families hadn't come to claim them were hastily buried.

After my meeting with Maman Ocean, a Congolese colleague and I made some inquiries and found out that such a mass grave does, indeed, exist. It lies in a remote section of the Mwangeji cemetery.

We arrived there in the early afternoon. Mwangeji occupies a giant plot in the middle of town, next to a group of shops that sell wooden coffins.

Marcel, a 19-year-old IT student in a blue suit, was heading for his lunch break. He worked as a gravedigger to make some extra cash, he said. He knew where the unknown miners were buried. There were about 30 of them, he said.

Marcel ushered us into the cemetery, which was quiet and huge and overgrown. Graves were everywhere in the soft soil, and only a few paths wended their way through them.

At the yard's southern wall, two men were digging. They shouted that I should get out and that I needed authorization to be in the cemetery, even though it was a public site and I was a fully accredited journalist.

Marcel led me away, taking me on a roundabout route through wooden crosses staked into the ground. "Mwangeji is full," he said. "There is no *terre vièrge*"—no virgin ground.

The empty areas only appeared empty, because the tall grass and bushes that covered the cemetery were burned at the end of the dry season to free up space for more graves. The wooden crosses would also burn in the flames.

Marcel brought us into an area of thick bush. After a few feet, the foliage thinned out. The mass grave was here, he said, and pointed at a patch of scrub. This is where the bodies had been dumped after the tunnel collapsed.

There were no markings. Reed grass had grown from the soil, and it was long and red and feathery. It shuddered in the breeze.

Thirty bodies lay in the ground beneath our feet. They belonged to men who had been digging out the metals that keep our world powered, and they had been crushed, deep under the earth, in Congo.

To meet the climate goals that will make a dent in global warming, we need to make massive investments in environmentally responsible mining. At the same time, there is still much that needs to be done to focus the world's attention on the devastation wrought by many forms of mining—to our shared planet, to local lives and livelihoods—and how to mitigate it.

We should listen to the people from the places where we get our minerals. We must consider their dreams for a healthier, more balanced world.

Perhaps what the power-storage sector suffers from the most is a lack of imagination. Many mining companies seem uninterested in the possibilities provided by clean energy. "The big miners haven't invested in critical-metals projects because they're too small," said Brian Menell, the CEO of TechMet, an investment company that specializes in such projects. "One billion dollars barely moves the dial." But he also thought that few people have woken up to the opportunities offered by critical metals. "There is still a degree of naïveté," Menell said. The problem, he continued, is that businesspeople and politicians in Europe and the United States don't look beyond the short term and invest in projects that are important for the future. "You need political will, which you don't have," Menell argued. "We should have autoworkers in Detroit demonstrating for more mining; we should have students demanding that their universities invest in clean mining. If investment doesn't happen, we won't make our climate-change goals over the next 20 years."

One way to reconcile the goals of this new energy revolution with the terrible toll it is taking on communities is simple: We should listen to the people who live in the places where we get our minerals. We must listen to them about the pollution in their communities and the exploitation of their laborers and consider their dreams for a healthier, more balanced world.

Such people are commonly excluded from the decisions about how their land is to be used, thanks to the big-stakes financial dealings and the complex, often deadly geopolitical games in the cutthroat competition for resources. But the citizens of wealthy countries cannot simply hope that innovation will save the planet or ignore the horrific suffering that has come to be accepted as the unavoidable price for cleaner cities. To do so risks entrenching a system of cruelty and environmental ruin that will eventually, in ways we are only just beginning to understand, prove as destructive as any hydrocarbon. **N**

SCHALK VAN ZUYDAM / AP PHOTO

Cobalt blues: A view of the Shinkolobwe mine shows the devastation that cobalt mining can wreak on the environment.

This article is adapted from The Elements of Power: A Story of War, Technology, and the Dirtiest Supply Chain on Earth, *by Nicolas Niarchos (© 2025 HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.).*

FIORELLO LA GUARDIA IN EAST HARLEM, 1933 / IRVING HABERMAN / GETTY IMAGES

Lucky Corner

How Fiorello La Guardia and a popular front of radicals and reformers transformed New York City

BY MICHAEL KAZIN

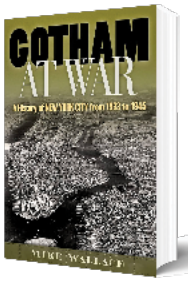
Mike Wallace's *Gotham at War* is the third and final volume of the most ambitious—and probably the lengthiest—work ever produced about the history of a single American metropolis. The first, simply titled *Gotham*, came out in 1999 and was cowritten with Edwin G. Burrows. More than 1,000 pages long, it began with the fateful meeting on the island of Manhattan between Lenape natives and Dutch colonists early in the 17th century and concluded with the merger of the five boroughs into a single "supercity" in 1898. It won the Pulitzer Prize for history.

Wallace then took 18 years to produce a sequel. *Greater Gotham*'s time frame was far more modest

than its predecessor's. Writing solo this time, Wallace zeroed in on the two decades between 1898 and the end of World War I. But like the first book, *Greater Gotham* contained multitudes, with fascinating chapters on everything from the subway, housing, and the Bronx Zoo to vaudeville, feminism, and child labor.

While not neglecting tales of social and cultural life, *Gotham at War* focuses more on the eruptions from elsewhere that shook and remade New York City. It begins in 1933 with a Brooklyn-based boycott of goods made in Nazi Germany and concludes with the decision by United Nations delegates to make the city their permanent headquarters. Like the previous volumes, its achievement lies not in its interpretive framework but rather in the wealth of detail that Wallace discovers and rolls out in a style both vivid and precise.

Taken as a whole, this grand trilogy represents an unstated tribute to the new social history, or "people's history," that became popular beginning in the 1960s. Now 83, Wallace was one of the founding editors of *Radical History Review*, the journal that helped to pioneer this emerging genre of scholarship. He had studied with the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Richard Hofstadter when getting his PhD at Columbia. But like many of his New Left peers, he grew frustrated with the kind of consensus political history that was being written by liberals like his adviser, which then dominated scholarship about the American past.



Gotham at War
A History of New York City From 1933 to 1945
By Mike Wallace
Oxford University Press.
976 pp. $45

Wallace wanted to write a history of the United States that foregrounded the experience of people often left out of traditional accounts: its radical and reform activists, its workers and immigrants. But he also believed it would be a mistake to write solely about ordinary people. "I don't think you can do history and call it history and call it radical if you only look at radicals, the downtrodden trodding up," he observed in a *New York Times* interview later in life: One also had to write about the elites who built and ran the structures of the economy and state that did much to keep "the people" down but that also sometimes aided their ascent.

Wallace and Burrows had originally set out to explore this rich history on a far grander geographic scale, with an examination of capitalism in the entire nation. "We had written hundreds of pages, but had barely gotten out of the 17th century," Wallace recalled. And so "that's when we decided to make it more manageable and tell the story through New York City."

The new volume offers a compelling look at the way a big city's economy functioned in an age of global war. Wallace describes how women broke through numerous glass ceilings: wielding tools in shipyards and munitions plants, driving taxis, and clerking on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. He notes the subterfuge required to create a new weapon of mass destruction that would transform war forever: an office on lower Broadway served as the first headquarters of the top-secret program to build an atomic bomb. The enterprise was soon moved to other spots on the map, but it remained known as the Manhattan Project, "a false front" to confuse the enemy.

He makes room, too, for sketches of how New Yorkers managed to have a damn good time despite, or even because of, the momentous conflict that none could ever truly escape. The hit musical *Oklahoma!*, Wallace points out, was the work of two "fighting liberals" raised in New York, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, who presented "a prelapsarian vision of a time when social tensions had (supposedly) been subsumed in the name of patriotic comity." Bebop jazz, Afro-Cuban dance music, and cheap paperbacks also proliferated, as did the frantic eroticism of an old Times Square where hordes of young people, in and out of uniform, came looking for hookups and usually found them.

With his omnibus method, Wallace sometimes strains to make a New York connection to every national development that took place in the era. But he does document a wealth of fine ones—from the New York roots of the Popular Front to the story of those Gothamites who led the long and successful battle to tear down the color line in professional baseball. He introduces Lester Rodney, sports editor of *The Daily Worker*, who ran countless pieces advocating the integration of baseball, and describes how Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and two leftists, US Representative Vito Marcantonio and City Councilman Benjamin Davis, demanded investigations into the persistence of Jim Crow on professional diamonds. Finally, the same month that Japan surrendered in 1945, the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson to a minor-league contract.

Wallace would not have devoted so many years and so many pages to the *Gotham* trilogy if he hadn't been guided by a great love for the city. He has a particular fondness for anecdotes that beam with an aggressive insouciance familiar to any lifelong New Yorker. Midway through the current volume, he tells of a German U-boat captain who had sunk many Allied ships in the Atlantic. One night in 1942, the captain's U-boat surfaced off the coast of Brooklyn, seeking another kill:

> At 10:00 p.m., just below Coney Island, he paused on the city's very doorstep, gazing in amazement at the Ferris Wheel and the Parachute Jump highlighted against the blazing backdrop of light thrown up from incandescent Manhattan. The captain was mesmerized, and also irritated at the arrogance implicit in the luminous spectacle. Recalling blacked-out Europe, he jotted in his war diary: "Don't they know there's a war on?"

No one has ever known the history of New York City better than Mike Wallace or told it so well. Barring a total surrender to AI, I bet no one ever will.

At the center of *Gotham at War* are two stories that initially appear to be at odds. On the one hand, Wallace wants to dispute the comforting myth that, during the bloodiest war in history, America's "greatest generation" put aside its many differences and united on the home front to destroy the twin evils of European fascism and

Michael Kazin's latest book is What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party. *He is a professor of history at Georgetown University.*

Japanese militarism. In abundant and often captivating detail, Wallace shows the opposite: He describes the multiple battles among New Yorkers that raged before Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and continued until the horrific conflict finally ended and the Cold War began. He tells about those New York City radicals, liberals, and conservatives who argued furiously about whether to enter the war at all. He examines how, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, African Americans protested passionately against their de facto segregation from good jobs and decent housing, while pacifists demanded a negotiated peace instead of unconditional surrender. He describes how some of these conflicts between New Yorkers turned violent, as when pro-Nazi thugs beat up Jews at random and vandalized synagogues in northern Manhattan.

But the book tells a story of unity as well. Charting the formation of the Popular Front in New York, Wallace chronicles how an alliance of liberals and radicals was able to manage these discontents and govern the city with support, grudging or not, from most of its people. This coalition included socialist union leaders like Sidney Hillman (who organized the first political action committee) and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the eloquent Black councilman and minister whose weekly paper often echoed the views of the stalwartly anti-racist Communist Party. The message of wartime solidarity, Wallace notes, was also promoted by "fighting liberals" from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to Walter Winchell, a widely read columnist with a popular radio show who "linked domestic right-wingers to fascists abroad."

Throughout most of the 1930s and the entire Second World War, two New York politicians of rare skill and charisma headed up this coalition: Fiorello La Guardia and Franklin Roosevelt. La Guardia served three terms as mayor, during which his administration created the institutions of a nascent social democracy, from public housing to plenty of playgrounds to the nonprofit City Center of Music and Drama. Fluent in Italian and Yiddish, the flamboyant city executive once conducted the New York Philharmonic and took to the radio during a newspaper strike to act out cartoons that the city's children would otherwise have missed. Roosevelt, a former New York governor, was a close ally; throughout these years, he funneled thousands of jobs to city residents. His genial populism also won over tens of thousands of working-class New Yorkers who in other settings might have been divided along ethnic, religious, and political lines.

In many ways, La Guardia and Roosevelt made an odd couple.

In many ways, La Guardia and Roosevelt made an odd couple—at least at first. The son of European immigrants, La Guardia was a progressive Republican with socialist sympathies, while Roosevelt came from a wealthy and influential family of conservative Democrats. He'd grown up on an estate north of the city, near the Hudson River, that featured a stable and a horse track. Yet the two men shared the desire to forge a coalition that could narrow the gap between social classes by enacting policies that favored the needs of working people over those of the "economic royalists" who, Roosevelt asserted, "had reached out for control over Government itself."

In New York City, La Guardia funneled money to big municipal construction projects (including the airport that bears his name), encouraged labor organizers, and expanded public housing. He was also an unyielding foe of fascists both at home and abroad. Down in Washington, FDR and the Democratic Congress passed similar measures, although the president failed to convince lawmakers to repeal the embargo against sending arms to nations threatened by the rise of Hitler and Mussolini until World War II began. But before the US entered the war, Wallace writes, "Roosevelt and his New Deal comrades had…planted a standard—a left-liberal ensign, blazoned with the colors of social democracy and antifascism—to which a critical cohort of like-minded New Yorkers would now repair."

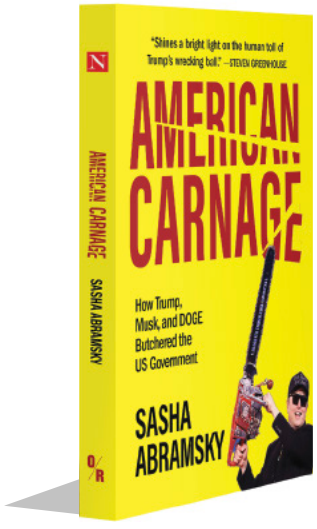
The local government that flew this flag embodied a popular vision of cultural tolerance and a politics aimed at providing a decent life for all. But it was something of a vanguard at a time when Jim Crow, antisemitism, and libertarian economics still held sway in many cities and states. As early as 1936, a Russian-born novelist just starting out as a popular crusader for untrammeled capitalism grouched to a friend, "You have no idea how radical and pro-Soviet New York is." Her name was Ayn Rand.

The story of how the Popular Front, led by the mayor and his good friend in the White House, dominated public life in New York drives the narrative of *Gotham at War*. Wallace rarely describes any aspect of daily life unless it bears on that larger drama. He says almost nothing, for example, about how ordinary, non-activist New Yorkers survived the Great Depression, and little about how they experienced the Second World War.

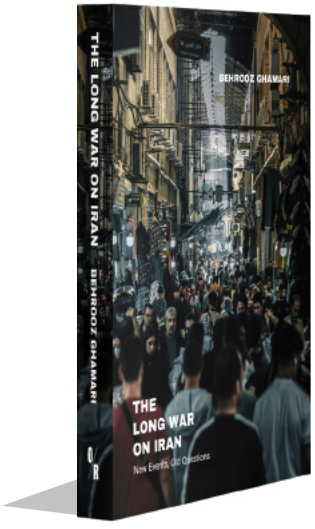
One of the book's more poignant images is the close-up of a newsstand and its doleful operator, snapped the day after Roosevelt died in April 1945. The photo, published in *Look* magazine, was shot by Stanley Kubrick, then a 16-year-old Jewish kid from the Bronx. Alas, the middle-aged fellow in a cloth cap and wrinkled tweed jacket glancing at the headlines remains anonymous. It's a metaphor of sorts for Wallace's attention to the big changes that rocked the city in these years more than to the working folks who were often protagonists in the narratives told in the first two volumes of his landmark history.

All this took place in a metropolis as critical to the war effort as any in the nation. Over 10 percent of the city's population—736,000 New Yorkers—joined the armed forces. The city's myriad small factories turned out a cornucopia of military goods, ranging from periscopes for submarines, to penicillin and meals for GIs, to napalm, the fiendish liquid that burns skin to the bone. "Wartime Gotham remained by far the largest manufacturing center in the nation," Wallace reports, "unsurpassed in diversity of industries, number of factories, and aggregate volume."

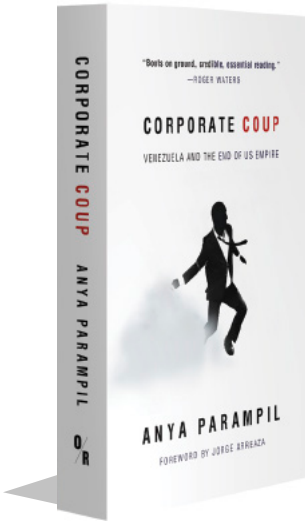
INTELLIGENCE REPORTS



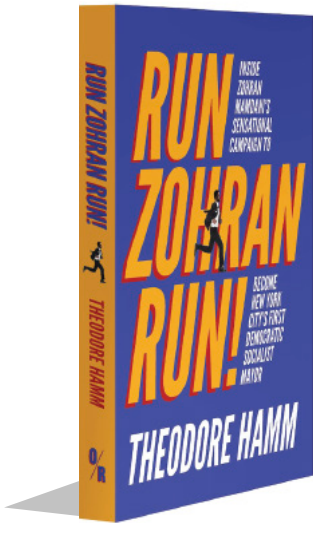
The consequences of Donald Trump's war on the so-called "deep state," told through the experiences of eleven fired federal workers as their lives are thrown into chaos.



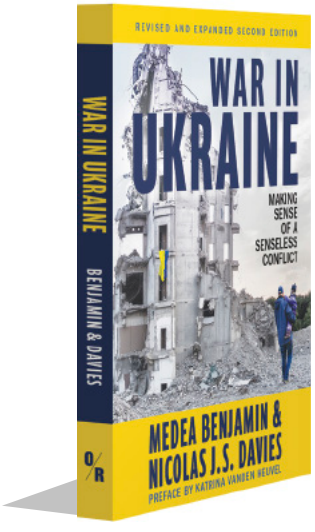
"Ghamari parts the dark veil surrounding Iran, allowing us to finally see through the fog of mystification and misdirection that has warped our perception of one of the world's most misunderstood societies." **JEFFREY ST. CLAIR**



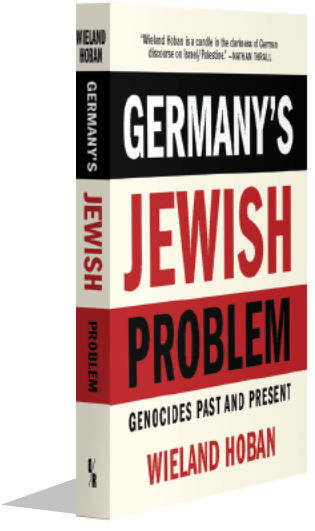
This gripping story from Venezuela shines light on the grim, shadowy character of a US foreign policy that tramples on democratic norms around the globe.



A gripping inside look at how Zohran Mamdani's bold, grassroots campaign toppled New York's political establishment and delivered the city's most progressive mayoral victory.



"This careful, informed, judicious study is an invaluable guide to understanding Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine, and most crucially, how we can act to help bring this terrible tragedy to an end." **NOAM CHOMSKY**



Hoban unravels the cultural neuroses and political cynicism that have made Germany an outlier in its support for Israeli crimes.

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In telling these stories, Wallace makes no attempt to hitch all his mini-narratives of industry, local discord, and politics to a grand interpretation. Instead of an explicit thesis, *Gotham at War* takes an ultra-empirical approach. Wallace assembles a huge collage of individuals and organizations, events and businesses, to suggest his view of what occurred and why, but without announcing a larger meaning to the grand story he is telling. On this massive canvas, he also pastes lyrics from popular songs, emotional images from war posters and comic books, and a grab bag of surprising statistics.

Did you know, for example, that nearly 40 percent of the Chinese Americans in New York City were drafted? Exclusion acts passed earlier by Congress kept Chinese men from building families that would have exempted them from the draft. Wallace also notes that, in the middle of the Great Depression, the posh and venerable Union Club offered its wealthy members "a choice of thirty dishes for breakfast, any of which could be served in bed."

Without a big idea to guide readers through more than 800 pages of text and illustrations, Wallace relies on his unparalleled knowledge of every significant aspect of the city's past to entice those readers to keep turning his many pages. Because he writes with wit and flair, one seldom regrets the absence of a larger argument.

Analogies between the political scene that Wallace describes and the one that exists in the city today come naturally to mind. The specter of fascism looms at home now instead of abroad, but New Yorkers elected a dynamic young socialist as their mayor. Like La Guardia, Zohran Mamdani won by building a multiethnic coalition of liberals and radicals and gained the support of most unions. He has ambitious plans to provide low-cost housing and to raise wages for the many and taxes for the wealthy few. And his charismatic ebullience makes it hard to portray him as someone out to punish those who disagree with his policies.

Still, no mayor of New York can be entirely or perhaps even mostly the master of their own fate. La Guardia easily won all three of his elections. But in 1945, with both New York's economic future and a fourth personal victory uncertain, he declined to run again. And even if had run again and won he would no longer have been certain that the money he had promised to repair and expand the city's infrastructure would be available. The federal government would have supplied most of the funds, and with the war over and FDR in his grave, the Little Flower sensed that was not going to happen.

With the Republicans in charge of the presidency and Congress, Mamdani will not be able to turn to Washington as La Guardia did during the New Deal. The surprising warmth Trump expressed when they met in November will likely cool once the mayor tries to implement policies that conservatives in and away from Gotham will hate. And there won't be a global war to persuade a majority of New Yorkers to rally against a common enemy determined to humble or destroy them. One can only hope that, as with La Guardia's election in 1933, his victory will be the harbinger of a progressive surge in the rest of our country. **N**

Riotous Company

Thomas Pynchon's America

BY BENJAMIN KUNKEL

If God had a personality, what would it be like? The two most obvious answers—God is benevolent and merciful; God is wrathful and jealous—are plainly in contradiction with one another. To discuss the question further would mean entering into theology; the point here is only to take a stab at the character of the most God-like of American novelists, Thomas Pynchon.

Across seven decades and, now, nine novels, Pynchon has exhibited so great an ability to create the world—to describe it in all its historical and geographical variety, as well as to supplement it with imaginary extras, like time travel and teleportation—that it appears the gift of some omnipotent deity. A second God-like trait is at once more mysterious and banal: We simply don't know what Pynchon looks like, apart from a few photos of a bucktoothed student and Navy seaman of the 1950s. Otherwise, this exceptionally famous writer has refused to be photographed. It was probably with Pynchon in mind that Don DeLillo had his reclusive novelist Bill Gray, in *Mao II*, say: "When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear."

In Pynchon's case, God's personality is split most evidently between the somber and the silly—gravity and its rainbow, as it were. His undeniably serious books take as their subjects such heavy historical matters as the Blitz and, indirectly, German colonialism (*Gravity's Rainbow* itself); chattel slavery, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and intimations of a future civil war in prerevolutionary North America (*Mason & Dixon*); and the consolidation of industrial capitalism, including the bloody repression of organized labor, in the late-19th-century United States (*Against the Day*). At the same time, these epic works of historical fiction, the shortest of them some 700 pages long, also behave like indefatigable excursions into light opera: The for-the-most-part heartlessly two-dimensional

ILLUSTRATION BY LILY QIAN

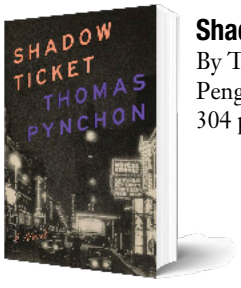
characters all have silly names (say Scorpia Mossmoon, who hardly matters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, who basically narrates *Mason & Dixon*), and when these cartoonish personages are not busy working for outfits that themselves boast risible titles (like ACHTUNG—the Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, in Northern Germany—from *Gravity's Rainbow*, or SMEGMA, the Semi-Military Entity Greater Milwaukee Area, from *Shadow Ticket*, the new novel), they are often bursting into song and/or making bad puns. Altogether, it's as if Our Father in Heaven were mainly interested in His creation as an occasion for Dad jokes.

Pynchon's characteristic combination of tonal high spirits and doomward subject matter can be suggested by an offhandedly magisterial passage from *Against the Day* in which the Chums of Chance, a riotous company of turn-of-the-century dirigibilists, notice that the hot air and joyous songs that propel them over the Western steppe by no means forestall a less merry scene below:

> From this height it was as if the Chums, who, on adventures past, had often witnessed the vast herds of cattle adrift in ever-changing cloudlike patterns across the Western plains, here saw that unshaped freedom being rationalized only into movement in straight lines and right angles and a progressive reduction of choices, until the final turn through the final gate that led to the killing floor.

It's as if this inveterate maker of smutty jokes had also read Max Weber, or Jason Moore, on the fatal rationalization of earthly nature attendant upon capitalist modernization.

Another division bisecting Pynchon's output has to do with genre. The sweeping magical-historical picaresques on which his reputation rests, all of them narrated from an omniscient point of view, were published between 1961 and 2006. Since then, Pynchon has published not simply lighter works, a category that would include the brief bad trip of *The Crying of Lot 49*, from 1966, or the great hippie fantasia *Vineland* from 1990. The generic difference marking out post–Great Recession Pynchon from the earlier stuff is more specific. Over the past 15 years, he has turned to the detective novel, in which events are recorded and (non-)revelations registered from the restricted POV of some put-upon private investigator. In his 2009 *Inherent Vice*, the hapless good-hearted gumshoe is Doc Sportello, a stoner probing the mysteries of post–Manson LA. (Speaking of theology, Doc spots a dude "wearing a T-shirt with the familiar detail from Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam*, in which God is extending his hand to Adam's



Shadow Ticket
By Thomas Pynchon
Penguin Press.
304 pp. $30

and they're just about to touch—except in this version God is passing a lit joint.") In *Bleeding Edge*, from 2013, it's the brash and kind fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow—"Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em," she calls her agency—who gets sucked into inspecting the deadly financial irregularities of a Silicon Alley start-up run by one Gabriel Ice, roughly between the dot-com bust and 9/11.

Pynchon's latest novel, *Shadow Ticket*, is another unraveling sleuth's tale, an expedition into the dark potentialities of the 1930s undertaken by a good-natured lug and former strikebreaker by the name of Hicks McTaggart, an employee of the Unamalgamated Ops detective agency of Milwaukee, presently in search of the fugitive heiress to a cheesemonger's empire. No spoiler alert is necessary in saying that you won't likely read a punchier account of the rise of classical fascism. Besides, are spoilers even possible with Pynchon? Oedipa Maas, our heroine in *The Crying of Lot 49*, experiences "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning" and, later, a sensation as though "there were revelation in progress all around her"—without these intimations ever delivering themselves into any definitive disclosure. This sets the pattern of Pynchon's at once teasing and exhaustive novels, including *Shadow Ticket*. As one of McTaggart's informants—the soda jerk and Prohibition-skirting booze-runner Hoagie Hivnak, if you must know—says: "You're the private investigator, laughing boy. Go investigate."

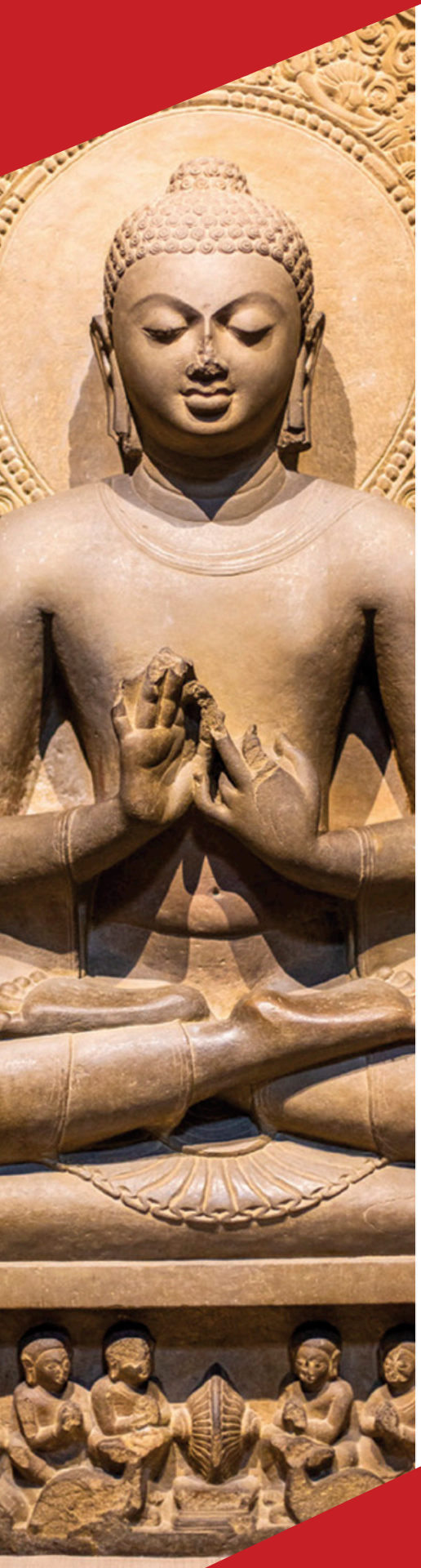
As I was reading and rereading Pynchon's oeuvre for this review, I also took in Fredric Jameson's brief book *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* and felt a pang of envy when this arch-theoretical critic dismisses the plots of Chandler's classic detective novels as "notoriously incomprehensible."

I would very much like to say the same of Pynchon's plots and leave it at that, going on then, more comfortably, to discuss the unrepresentability of social totality under capitalism. After all, if you put a gun to my head and ask me what the crime syndicates hashslingrz, in *Bleeding Edge*, or the Golden Fang, in *Inherent Vice*, are up to exactly besides being, respectively, some homicidal cybersecurity firm and some consortium of crooked dentists—well, I'm afraid that's my brains on the wall. But a book reviewer, like a PI, is a menial creature who must do his job.

The story of *Shadow Ticket* itself can be easily enough delineated, if not quite the spreading dimensions of its shadow. A *ticket* is investigative slang for a job, a gig—Maxine Tarnow in *Bleeding Edge* fantasizes a future day when her low-rent outfit might deal "only with class tickets"—and the ticket here, for Hicks McTaggart, is that his boss at U-Ops would like him to go and have a look-see for the vanished Daphne Airmont, legatee to the fortune of the equally absconded pater—or cheddar—familias Bruno Airmont, founder of an Upper Midwestern dairy dynasty. Keep your daughters close, dear readers, cuz it seems Daphne has taken up with a jazz clarinetist.

Little could be more Chandler-like than an unenthusiastic commission to chase an AWOL upper-class dame with questionable taste in men: "Mrs. Airmont would like her daughter back," as a lawyer puts it, "with as little public attention as possible, and without the clarinet player." The latter is a musician seemingly of Jewish descent (his swing band is called the Klezmopolitans, and he refuses to

Benjamin Kunkel is the author of Indecision *(a novel)*, Utopia or Bust *(essays), and* Buzz *(a play).*



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play "Nazi joints") by the name of Hop Wingdale, whose European booking agent is alive—as Pynchon is too—to the political overtones of even the most joyous music: "So each number you play to what could turn out to be a houseful of violent Jew-haters, gambling on their collective tin ear, you'll need to calibrate how klezmeratic, not to mention how Negro, you can afford to present yourself as." As always, the lightness of Pynchon can be felt in his capering manner and the darkness in his subject matter, here the ascent of fascism in the Central Europe of 1932–33, to which, it turns out, Daphne has run away with Mr. Wingdale.

Not that the connection between Hicks and his investigatee is merely contractual. See, once upon a time, Hicks saved a wayward teenage Daphne from a mobbed-up North Shore den of iniquity and deposited her for safekeeping at a Chippewa reservation—more precisely (if also very mysteriously, because this is Pynchon), "a *secret Indian reservation*, mentioned only once in a rider to a phantom treaty kept in a deep vault under a distant mountain belonging to the U.S. Interior Department and unrevealed even to those guarding it." Hicks bristles at the idea, expressed by several characters, that through having rescued Daphne, he became responsible for her life, but in the words of a hatmaker and Ojibwe sage who remonstrates with him: "Fact remains that once you put so much as a toe into the flow that is the life journey of another…" (ellipsis Pynchon's).

Much of Pynchon's novelistic method is to potentiate the psychedelic truisms and paranoid apprehensions of the 1960s—e.g., it's all connected, man; or, there's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear—into complex narrative machinery, and this is also the case in *Shadow Ticket*.

Early on, Hicks complains about his quest for the heiress absconditus: "Lot of fun for somebody, too bad that matrimonials, as you'll recall, were never my line." The trouble is, as Pynchon relates, "Private eyes of the 1930s are emerging from an era of labor unrest and entering one of spousal infidelity." Once serving capitalists as their hired guns, Depression-era detective agencies now find most of their business in chasing after unfaithful partners—a complaint in which it's perhaps possible to detect Pynchon's own preference for political subjects over the more usual romantic and sexual preoccupations of the American novel.

At any rate, Hicks needn't have worried that hunting down Daphne Airmont would prove a strictly household gig. Another Pynchonian precept is that things are never what they seem, and it emerges that a second party, dubiously presenting itself as the nascent FBI, would like to supplement Hicks's ostensible investigation with a more tenebrous affair, about which he will be told only what he needs to know. "Sounds like out-of-town work," Hicks observes, to which comes the reply: "Oh, quite far out of town in fact."

Next thing he knows (a favorite Pynchonian transition), Hicks finds himself aboard the ship *Stupendica*, crossing the Atlantic to Europe and thence to Hungary, one of the last-known whereabouts of Daphne and Hop. True to the form of Pynchon's detective novels, the narrow remit of the initial case ultimately casts a broad geopolitical shadow. So it is that a coke-addled Viennese cop named Egon Praediger, who may be no more (or less) of a true policeman than his supposed FBI colleagues, tells Hicks that his secondary employers are more interested in Bruno Airmont than in his daughter Daphne. Bruno, the one-time American "Al Capone of cheese," turns out to be caught up in something called the International Cheese Syndicate, or InChSyn. Cheese fraud naturally constitutes a serious problem for the belligerent turophiles of France, Italy, etc., but the political implications of cheese don't meet their rind even there: "Cheese Fraud being a metaphor of course," Herr Praediger explains, "a screen, a front for something more geopolitical, some grand face-off between the cheese-based or colonialist powers, basically northwest Europe, and the vast teeming cheeselessness of Asia."

Never mind the paneer erasure—such intimations of global war and decolonization aren't really cashed out in the antic story Pynchon unspools. Much of the political suggestiveness of *Shadow Ticket* depends instead upon the reader's knowledge of the bleak world that lies on the other side of the early '30s. As Hop Wingdale's booking agent, Nigel Trevelyan, grimly warns him: "We're in for some dark ages, kid. Dim at least. This could turn out to be thousands, maybe tens of thousands of lives." Of course, the dire presentiment is off by a few orders of magnitude.

In the end, Hicks does track down, and incidentally sleep with, Daphne. In keeping with Pynchon's countercultural orientation, their coupling has a cheerful casualness about it: Hicks refers to "some kidding around." Much more emotionally and narratively significant is Daphne's eventual reunion with her father, outside of Hicks's presence, in Fiume, Italy. There, before going on the lam once again, Bruno Airmont hands over to her the number to a secret account in Geneva containing neither money nor cheese but, as he says, "information": "Enough on the secret history of the InChSyn, and the full membership, anonymous and otherwise, to send the whole business up in one giant fondoozical cataclysm." In other words, the conclusion of this tale of dairy-bolical conspiracy is to assert that the real solution to the mystery lies ahead of us still. As before in Pynchon, the story closes on a preliminary note.

What, then, is the nature of the Pynchonian detective novel?

Beneath the complex architecture of Pynchon's plot proliferate the sort of glorious details that might keep one visiting Gothic cathedrals or ruined abbeys even without believing in God. Nearly everyone in *Shadow Ticket* gets to speak a more or less period patois bristling with fun slang: a $10 bill is a *sawbuck*; a gun is a *heater*; a bar is a *speak*; an attractive woman is a *tomato*; her legs are *pins*; and all of this and more is *jake*—that is, OK—with me.

Pynchon's polymathic knowledge is also fun (we learn, for example, that Milwaukee is the birthplace of the QWERTY keyboard), as is his characters' frequent ignorance: Hicks's fellow detective Lew Basnight understands high-class types to savor "oat cuisine." Nor is all the wordplay so innocent: "Der Führer is der future, Hicks," our hero's Reich-curious uncle assures him.

At the same time, Pynchon's encyclopedia of the real and imaginary world

also contains its blank pages. Much of the transportation in *Shadow Ticket* occurs, counterfactually, by way of autogyro—a sort of personal helicopter—and too often it's as if the narrative itself, after leaving Wisconsin, is only skimming the surface of Mitteleuropa. In Budapest, Hicks sits in the sidecar of a motorcycle "speeding over cobbles and under arches, flying, it seems, above broken road surfaces and up impossible grades, through gateways, down indoor-outdoor corridors that seem too narrow for a bike let alone a combination." Such hurried vagueness, here and elsewhere in *Shadow Ticket*, is very far from a Blitz-menaced London in *Gravity's Rainbow* so richly detailed that it was difficult not to feel that Pynchon, born in 1937 in New York State, was not somehow himself a survivor of the German barrage.

What, then, is the nature of the Pynchonian detective novel, of which we now have at least three examples? The basic model clearly derives from Chandler. Here, too, the protagonist is a wisecracking shamus with a sarcastic wit, male or, in *Bleeding Edge*, female. And in *Shadow Ticket*, at least, our sardonic hero also sports, like Chandler's Philip Marlowe, a sizable frame and is catnip to women; Hicks's main squeeze thinks of him as "a big ape with a light touch." (Maxine in *Bleeding Edge* is also pretty much a free-love type.)

In spite of his or her cynicism, the Pynchonian private dick is, also like Marlowe, a moral being, reluctant to mete out the sort of physical violence with which he or she is surrounded. Chandler's indelible character kills only one heavy across five novels. And Hicks McTaggart in *Shadow Ticket* is even more strongly defined by his aversion to murder. Having come close to icing a "four-eyed Bolshevik" during his strikebreaker days, Hicks feels enormous "relief at not having killed somebody." He instead conceives of his job as requiring him to "absorb any violence that might arise, as if there's some Private Dick Oath like the one doctors take, with a no-harm clause, which there isn't."

Much of the distinction of Chandler's detective novels consists in the fact that, unlike their genre predecessors, they don't represent the restoration of social order through the solution of a mystery and the fingering of a villain. The plots are too elusive and unsatisfying for that, and villains still abound after the story ends. Chandler's books are better understood in terms of their disavowed romanticism. A rescuer of innocents in peril adheres to a personal code of honor that he is able to conceal only by way of being a cynical guy who works for wages (in the form of expenses and a retainer) and by rescuing mostly blackmailers and other crooks, even on those occasions when the missing person doesn't turn out to have been dead before the action begins.

Despite the outward cynicism, the Pynchonian private dick is a moral being.

In Pynchon, the detective's disguise vocation is of a different kind. On the surface, his PIs could hardly pursue careers more different from his own. Servants to one-off missions not of their own choosing, they are people simply doing their jobs without any particular political commitments or knowledge of the world. Hicks, for example, is surprised to learn that *Bolshevik* is a Russian rather than Polish word—and still doesn't know what it means. But of course Pynchon's detectives end up stumbling into investigations that correspond to Pynchon's own excursions across just about as much of the breadth of a given historical moment as can be covered in a novel. It's as if, in his typical generosity, he has wanted to bestow upon a set of beleaguered hirelings the same omniscient vocation in which he himself clearly delights.

Upon the immediate advent of *Shadow Ticket*, articles in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* took up the question of whether Pynchon's mad universe in the novel had anticipated the crazy reality of the mid-2020s or, alternatively, had now been overtaken by events that rival or exceed his books for sheer craziness. To which the literary, not just journalistic, response can only be: fair enough.

American reality in the 21st century abounds with people bearing Pynchonian names, such as the whistleblower Reality Winner or the libertarian rancher Tuna McAlpine. Not to mention that a conspiracy like Pizzagate, in which right-wing paranoiacs decided on a somewhat slender evidentiary basis that the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC, must be a front for a pedophilia ring, is clearly a lurid plotline out of some aborted Pynchon composition. Never mind either that the cartoonishly corrupt big spender casually disparaged by Maxine Tarnow in *Bleeding Edge*—"Next invoice you can be Donald Trump or whatever, OK?"—is now the president of the United States in his second term.

More importantly, as Ryan Ruby brilliantly demonstrated in *New Left Review*, one can make a compelling case that the deeper convergences between Pynchon's 1930s and our own time are surely intended by the author. (I had refrained from reading Ruby's review before writing the bulk of my own and must confess to having failed to spot half the dovetailings he does.)

At the same time, however, that Pynchon's political or public world may coincide with the world we know, his fictions have in another and crucial way always proceeded along a track strangely parallel to that of historical reality, such that they can never truly converge with or depart from our own actually existing path. On one side of his work, that is, are dire scenes and calamitous events corresponding to the well-worn grooves of history; on another side, meanwhile, are characters, actants, personages, who appear to occupy a different, more fanciful timeline. So it is that Pynchon's imaginary people with their improbable names almost always seem to be having a good time in spite of the horrors that envelop them, joking and singing as they do. If these madcap figures are, as is so often the case, eccentrics, like the alligator-hunting Puerto Rican buddies of *V.* or the banana-crazed Captain Prentice of *Gravity's Rainbow*, they are not neurotically eccentric in a way that corresponds with the psychic life of our own society. Their departure from reigning norms exacts no steep price in worry and doubt. And when they experience pleasure of a more ordinary kind, such as having sex or getting high or dancing (for Hicks, a great hoofer, dancing itself is "vertical whoopee"), they are rarely punished or afflicted for their indulgences—

another departure from society as we know it. As for their ludicrous names, these make Pynchon's people appear to exist outside of history rather than to be creatures on whom the past, or the prior night's excesses, might weigh like a nightmare.

Alex Woloch, in his great study of the "character-system" of realist fiction, *The One vs. the Many*, notes that the realist novel "has always been praised for two contradictory generic achievements: depth psychology and social expansiveness, depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe." But in Pynchon's novels, the absence of depth psychology does not result, as in earlier periods of prose fiction, in a corresponding gain in persuasive social reality. Pynchon's characters are sociologically diverse—in class, occupation, and geography—without giving an impression of sociological reality in their attitudes and obsessions. They are simply too unusual and having too much fun for that.

A couple of explanations might be offered for the ebullient unreality of Pynchon's character world, bubbling alongside but never quite within the real historical developments portrayed in his books. Most obviously, one could argue that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, novelists have found it difficult to represent anything like the true breadth of social reality for the simple reason that their personal experience no longer permits a broad enough experience of society for them to realistically convey it. But a second and different explanation, not incompatible with the first, seems to me to fit even better the character-system of Pynchon's novels.

Pynchon is not just a lover of language. He is also a decidedly utopian writer.

Earlier, we dwelled for a moment on the strikingly split personality of Pynchon's work, in which the charnel house of modern history's darkest episodes is visited by dramatis personae who seem to be having the time of their lives. How is it that such happy figures populate such unhappy scenes? A writer otherwise utterly unlike Pynchon, the poet Yeats, insisted in one of his greatest poems that Hamlet and Lear could never really be unhappy in spite of their tragic roles and terrible fates; the great lines they were given to speak made them happy: "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread." Something of the same redemptive delight in language is also going on in Pynchon, whose characters don't seem quite capable of misery so long as history affords them jokes to make, slang to sling, and songs to join. But Pynchon is not just a lover of language. He is also a decidedly utopian writer, as if in his old-fashioned American good nature and democratic love of fun, he couldn't bear that his imaginary people should be realistically deformed and depressed by the painful world of capitalist history that they are condemned to inhabit. So, it would seem, he has populated his historical novels with joyous immigrants from some better future time, people who are not like us. Even when they work for wages, they never seem so unfree as that. **N**

SAXONY, GERMANY, 2021 (SEBASTIAN KAHNERT / GETTY IMAGES)

The Enclosure of All

The struggle over who controls nature

BY KOHEI SAITO

A NEW KIND OF POLITICS IS TAKING SHAPE IN JAPAN. This past fall, the Liberal Democratic Party's Sanae Takaichi, who had long been regarded as an outlier on the party's right flank, became the country's first female prime minister. This was no aberrational phenomenon: Takaichi entered office with approval ratings near 70 percent. Her predecessor, Shigeru Ishiba, had seen his support collapse to barely 30 percent after the Liberal Democrats' historic defeat in the July elections for the House of Councillors, analogous to the US Senate.

Part of Takaichi's rise was fueled by heat. After the rainy season ended unusually early in much of Japan, the country saw a third straight year of record-breaking temperatures as the global average increase approaches the 1.5°C target set by the Paris Agreement. Rice yields plummeted, and the resulting "rice shock" deepened public anxiety in an already inflationary economy and forced the government to release its emergency grain reserves for the first time.

Out of this economic and ecological turmoil came a right-wing-populist turn. Enraged at the Ishiba administration's tepid response, many voters turned to Sanseito (the "Do-It-Yourself Party"), whose platform combined promises of food self-sufficiency and support for organic farming with a rhetoric of "Japanese First." Over time, its mix of nationalism, conspiracy politics, and environmental populism curdled further into xenophobia and opposition to climate action, taking the form of attacks on immigrants, renewable energy, and vaccines. To win back the many defectors to Sanseito, the Liberal Democratic Party swerved ever more to the right and elevated Takaichi to power.

Sound familiar? From Donald Trump in the United States and Javier Milei in Argentina to the far-right resurgence in many parts of Europe, the pattern is unmistakable: The

convergence of ecological disaster, resource scarcity, a flagging and disoriented liberalism, and climate-driven displacement leads to an authoritarian turn. Nature itself has ceased to be a neutral backdrop to politics and has become instead a primary terrain of conflict—as seen in the fights over arable land and rare metals, in the inflation driven by crop failures and energy volatility, and in the desperate movements of climate refugees.

As a result, if we hope to avoid an era of "climate barbarism," in which we revert to some Hobbesian "state of nature," a "war of all against all," argues the political theorist Alyssa Battistoni, how we value nature becomes a decisive question for the future of democracy and freedom. How can we share scarce metals and soils while preserving the basic conditions of collective survival—breathable air, drinkable water, and a habitable climate? The problem is not merely how much we can take from the earth, but how we might reorganize society so that freedom no longer depends on the oppression of others or the expropriation of nature.

These questions are at the center of Battistoni's new book, *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature*, in which she expands on her earlier work in ecosocialist theory (including *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*, which she cowrote with Kate Aronoff, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos) to offer a systematic reexamination of how capitalism organizes and transforms the natural world. In *Free Gifts*, Battistoni traces a long intellectual arc—from the classical political economists and Karl Marx's critique of value to 20th-century feminism and contemporary ecological thought—to explain how nature came to be treated as the supposedly cost-free support of capital accumulation. Along the way, she also shows that capitalism's current environmental crisis is not simply the result of ignoring nature's worth, but of depending on its very non-valuation to justify an endless extraction of resources that appears to exist outside the sphere of price.

Free Gifts
Capitalism and the Politics of Nature
Princeton University Press.
328 pp. $39.95

Battistoni's central argument is both simple and radical: Capitalism persists and develops only by systematically undervaluing nature, treating its forces and resources as "free gifts." Battistoni uses this particular term for a reason: It comes from both classical political economy and Marxist critique and, she argues, refers to a "distinctively capitalist" phenomenon—the way in which our current social and economic systems treat nature as a costless input.

While we often think about the process in which the earth and its precious resources—water, land, air, oil, natural gas, minerals, forests, and even the atmosphere itself—were enclosed and turned into commodities, Battistoni emphasizes that, at the point of this enclosure and even afterward, they have often remained free to capital, even if they are never free to the wider society. A process of devaluation has taken place to create the world we live in: Capital extracts from the earth, but often without paying for any of that extraction's costs.

As a result, Battistoni observes, the true social and ecological costs of carbon emissions, microplastics pollution, or Amazonian deforestation do not appear in market prices, though their burdens are imposed on us all. This structural disjuncture fuels rampant ecological devastation and what economists euphemistically refer to as the "tragedy of the commons."

The capitalist order exploits not only the surpluses of labor but also the natural world.

While mainstream neoclassical economics acknowledges these problems as "negative externalities" and proposes corrective pricing mechanisms or valuation models for "ecosystem services" to internalize the true costs, Battistoni rejects the premise underlying such solutions. For her, the failure to value nature is not simply a technical flaw in measurement; it is intrinsic to capitalism's way of valuing human labor as a commodity.

Battistoni argues that capitalism contains within it a distinct form of "humanism." It does not prioritize human life or exalt humanity's unique characteristics, but it does privilege human beings over nonhuman nature in another way: It views them as capable of producing value through their labor. As a result, that which is nonhuman is considered outside the realm of any meaningful valuation. This is discernible in the fact that capital at least has to pay wages for workers, while the value that is extracted from nature goes unremunerated. As long as this fundamental devaluation remains the essential characteristic of the social system, then even when parts of nature are priced, they enter the market as mere commodities that can be bought, traded, and appropriated.

To address capitalism's tendency to appropriate natural elements and forces, Battistoni does not propose new techniques for valuation. Rather than a technocratic solution that would regulate nature's market from above, she argues for a political resolution that empowers people to once again decide what gets valued, and how. In place of market fixes, she calls for a reorganization of social life that would allow labor, and humanity in general, to reclaim its capacity to choose what counts as value and what kinds of work—both human and nonhuman—should sustain the world. For Battistoni, ultimately, ecological survival is also a struggle for freedom and collective self-determination.

To tease out these implications, she starts by asking how capitalism enabled nature's devaluation in the first place. To do so, Battistoni draws on two distinct elements of Marx's critique of political economy: She investigates how our relationship to the environment is part of a fundamentally unified biophysical process that Marx called the "universal metabolism of nature," and she examines how this metabolic relationship between humans and nature is then mediated and reshaped by the way that capitalism turns

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How to Build a Moon Garden When the News Is All Horror

To see where the moon melts over the garden,
or where the bats flit, or where the air sweetens

with pollen and moth-frenzy, I recommend
a night walk to discern the perfect patch for it.

Under this glow, we could all use a distraction—
dig with a silver shovel and choose colors that swoon

and moan under our satellite: dusty pinks,
baby blue, lavender, white, and butter yellow gems

unfurl at dusk until dawn. Sometimes moonflower
vining over trellis looks like a waterfall

out of the corner of your eye. So many to choose from:
evening primrose, night-blooming jasmine, heliotrope,

tuberose, 4 o'clocks, lamb's ear, astilbe, calla lily, white clematis,
fairy candles, periwinkles, and you can even launch snowballs

in summer with creamy oak hydrangeas. Turn off the hiss
and whir from man-made lights and walk the night,

walk the grass, the fence line, let your boot crackle over
pebble and stick bits. Careful if skunks shuffle over to see what

all the fuss is about. Don't tussle with weeds. If you set
your shovel down, skunks won't bother you at all.

And on the off chance they do, at least the spray might
sizzle like stars. Bats swoop and fly erratic, but birds

glide between wing flap—that's how you can tell what
flutters across a lake moon. If you make a moon garden,

even the dark lapping of water under a duck-shush of wave
won't be louder than the silver in your own bright yard.

AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL

everything produced by human labor into one kind of value or another to exchange on a market.

As Battistoni reminds us, there has always been something called "use value." The production of a desk, for example, marks the material transformation of wood into an object with a value defined by its use. (It is the thing we would use to write big books about political economy on, for example.) But under capitalism, a second process takes place: the creation of a commodity whose primary purpose is the realization of the profit found in its "exchange value." Unlike use value, which is firmly rooted in material utility and the more immediate metabolic relationship between humanity and nature, exchange value does not exist in nature at all—it is a purely social form unique to how profits are extracted in a capitalist system of production.

Battistoni points out, however, that this does not make it an illusion. The value of goods when exchanged exerts immense power over our desires, behaviors, and institutions. Above all else, it is the reason why the economy is organized in the way that it currently is. It also has a transformative effect, Battistoni notes, on how we metabolize nature. The expansion of commodity production, driven by the imperative to maximize profit, systematically transforms and reshapes our metabolic relationship with nature, leading to serious disruptions.

Much as capitalism attempts to compel workers to work harder for longer hours, it also extracts more and more from nature, which changes the human body as well as the natural environment. Changes in bodies and nature, of course, happen all the time, but the problem is that the imperatives of extracting a profit from nature's exchange value is dissociated from the concrete material processes of the natural world. In a capitalist system, the expanding and accelerating processes of industry and commerce have very little relation to the cycles and concrete changes found in nature, and so when the principles of exchange value dictate how nature is consumed, it changes the very life of the planet.

However, as Battistoni observes, nature does find ways of fighting back: The seasons, the limits of physical materials, and the sheer unruliness of the natural world, can hinder capital's efforts to extract exchange value from it. There is also what she terms a "suprasumption": "the existence of matter in excess of its subordination to capital, which often constitutes obstacles to accumulation." In my book *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*, I described this same phenomenon as "nature against capital." By refusing to conform to capitalist time frames and calculation—by eroding machinery, exhausting soil, unleashing unpredictable climatic feedbacks, and existing beyond total capture—the excesses of nature expose the fragility of accumulation itself. It reminds us that even the most abstract forms of value ultimately depend on a material world that will not be fully tamed.

Of course, we are not so lucky as to see nature rise up against capitalism as some kind of exploited biotariat. But simply realizing the impossibility of fully and arbitrarily manipulating the biophysical world for the sake of profit does make clear the limits of capital's power over the earth. In this way, even if capitalism continues to ravage the natural world, nature can become a meaningful realm of political contestation. It is here that we recognize not only the limits of capitalism but also the capacity we possess to reshape society and nature in an entirely different way.

What capital leaves behind can serve as the raw material for a radical new politics.

A capitalist system might seek to destructively exploit natural resources—forests, soils, oceans—because it incurs no direct costs for doing so. But, as Battistoni asserts, since it has to "abdicate" from certain domains, such as agriculture and care work, that resist full mechanization and industrialization, capitalism cannot fully subsume all of the world. There are places where freedom from its profit motives can exist and where humanity can find important footholds in the struggle for liberation: domains of life that challenge or transcend capital and offer spaces in which cooperation, regeneration, and nonmarket forms of value might and can continue to operate. What capital abandons as unprofitable can become a site of possible emancipation.

This concept of freedom lurking on the edges of capitalist domination serves as the underlying politics that Battistoni proposes in *Free Gifts*. "To offload the risk, both physical and financial, of the volatile and unpredictable patterns associated with many natural processes," she writes, capital cedes some terrain—and it is here that new forms of struggle and cooperation can take root. The very sectors that capital neglects—such as care work, subsistence farming, and ecological restoration—can be the ones in which collective agency reasserts itself and alternative ways of organizing labor and valuing life can emerge. What capital leaves behind as waste or surplus or a simple absence of value can serve as the raw material for another politics: one grounded in reproduction, repair, and shared responsibility for the world.

If nature's rebellion against capitalism opens new terrains for contestation, then the question becomes: What kinds of politics might emerge in these spaces cut off from capitalism? In the past, some of these arguments have been invoked in defense of an environmental politics seeking to align sustainability with justice—from the early eco-socialists to today's degrowth and climate-justice movements. They have also surfaced on the right, where eco-fascists have weaponized ecological scarcity to justify exclusion, border violence, and racial hierarchy.

But for Battistoni, the ultimate stakes of this struggle over nature lie not only in ecology but also in freedom. Capitalist domination restricts human agency and autonomy not simply by exploiting labor but by forcing individuals to depend on markets and commodities for their survival. Even the most environmentally conscious worker cannot freely choose a sustainable way of life in a system that commodifies housing, mobility, food, and energy. A car may be depicted as the symbol of individual freedom, yet, in the United States, for instance, it is often a sheer necessity—one that burdens households with debt and dependence because of decades of underinvestment in public transportation.

If nature becomes a realm organized by collective self-determination, then it can also become a vector for freedom in a world in which capitalism often creates domination. In this way, an ecological politics can serve as a foundation for

socialist politics. Climate catastrophes already constrain our freedoms, and as temperatures continue to rise, the space for democratic choice and collective action will only narrow further. Yet these material limits do not need to erase the possibility of agency. In recognizing the natural world's limits and contingencies, its seasons and metabolic cycles, and working with them rather than against them, socialists can achieve what they often struggle to realize when practicing their politics in those more traditional modes that set the politics of ecology to the side.

Climate catastrophes will continue to constrain our freedoms if we don't stop them.

For Battistoni, this new eco-socialism means grounding politics in the kinds of labor and care that already engage with nature on its own terms and that help to sustain life itself. This could mean reclaiming public control over the resources and infrastructure required to live, or organizing workers in sectors like energy, agriculture, and caregiving. By learning to act within, rather than despite, the planet's own rhythms, she suggests, radicals can turn ecological interdependence into a foundation for solidarity and democratic planning. The climate crisis is not merely a restriction on freedom; it is the terrain on which freedom can be redefined and practiced anew—in, against, and beyond capitalism.

All of this brings us to the most pressing question of our time: What institutions might enable the realization of a politics that both respects nature and achieves freedom through it? Unfortunately, *Free Gifts* offers few concrete answers. Battistoni is clear and precise in diagnosing capitalism's structural devaluation of nature and its consequences for human freedom, and in offering the more abstract contours of a radical politics that might liberate us from them. But she remains deliberately cautious about prescribing institutional forms beyond capitalism. Should we imagine democratic control over ecological resources on a local, national, or planetary scale? What mechanisms could prevent the reemergence of market logics or new forms of domination while maintaining material coordination and solidarity? How can we revalue nature without commodifying it? These questions are left unresolved in the book.

Yet this may not necessarily be a weakness. Rather than offering a utopian blueprint, Battistoni urges us to confront the structural foundations of our present crisis and to begin the collective work of imagining alternatives. In this way, *Free Gifts* is not unlike much of Marx's own work, which offered a rigorous critique of political economy rather than a prescriptive program and left the task of transformation to collective praxis and historical struggle. Battistoni follows Marx's broader approach: to ground politics in the concrete analysis of existing conditions and to allow the forms of transformation to emerge flexibly from that understanding.

In a world increasingly marked by "climate barbarism"—a world in which floods, fires, and resource shortages fuel authoritarian responses rather than solidarity—this combined politics of nature and freedom might be the only sustainable alternative. In the United States, Japan, and many other nations, where climate policy remains hostage to fossil-capital interests and reactionary politicians mobilize anti-environmental rhetoric to consolidate power, *Free Gifts* offers an urgently needed reframing of our most basic assumptions about political and economic life. The challenge, Battistoni reminds us, is not merely to "fix" market failures through carbon pricing or so-called ESG metrics, but to recognize that capitalism's very logic of devaluation drives ecological destruction, subordinates reproductive work, and erodes democratic freedom. The choice, then, is not between technocratic market corrections and a nostalgic retreat into an imagined "natural" past, both of which exist within the capitalist domination of nature. It is between a politics that treats nature as a site of capital's domination and a democratic politics that centers collective agency within our shared and fragile ecological conditions.

In this sense, *Free Gifts* is more than a critique of capitalism—it is a call to action. Our burning planet, after all, is the only one we have, so we must find or create spaces of freedom upon it. N

City Limits

Sunnyside Yard and the quest for affordable housing in New York

BY KARRIE JACOBS

One of the most memorable promises that new York City's newly inaugurated Mayor Zohran Mamdani made during his campaign was to freeze the rent for tenants of the city's 1 million rent-stabilized apartments. The idea sounds simple, suggesting that there's a quick and easy way for a mayor to tackle one of the city's most insoluble problems.

But nothing in New York is ever quick and easy. One of the complicating factors is that the mayor can't freeze the rents himself. He needs the approval of the city's nine-member Rent Guidelines Board, which votes annually on whether landlords can increase the rents on regulated apartments and, if so, by how much. The board is appointed by the mayor, but it's largely regarded as independent and data-driven. This is not to say that a rent freeze can't be done. Under Mayor Bill de Blasio, the Rent Guidelines Board froze the rent three times during his two terms: in 2015, in 2016, and in 2020, during the Covid pandemic.

The proposal also faces a backlash from those in the real estate industry, who argue that a rent freeze will undermine the solvency of the landlords who typically own what are known as "naturally occurring" rent-stabilized buildings: smaller, older buildings that are in perennial need of expensive maintenance.

However, the real issue when it comes to Mamdani's signature housing proposal is straightforward: It's not enough. On its own, it's not big enough or radical enough to tackle the real problem, which is one of supply and demand. New York City, after all, has a population of 8.5 million and a rental vacancy rate of 1.4 percent.

Mamdani clearly knows this. In a position paper issued back in February 2025, when he was still a blip on the political radar, he vowed to "triple the City's production of publicly subsidized, permanently affordable, union-built, rent-stabilized homes, constructing 200,000 new units over the next 10 years." He also promised to "triple the amount of housing built with City capital funds," creating

SUNNYSIDE YARD, C. 1971 (GETTY IMAGES)

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"200,000 new affordable homes over 10 years for low-income households, seniors and working families." Four hundred thousand new units may not be enough either, but it's a start—and building this housing would surely be one measure of his success as mayor.

As most of his predecessors learned, building affordable housing is challeng ing, and past mayors tended to pad their achievements. Over the fiscal year 2025, for example, the previous mayor, Eric Adams, "built" or "preserved" 33,715 affordable units and claimed that by the end of his single term, 425,000 units "will have been built, preserved or planned for." Similarly, de Blasio announced at the end of his two terms that he'd reached his goal of creating and preserving 200,000 units: "Over the administration, more than 66,000 affordable units have been created and another 134,000 have been preserved."

If only "preserved" and "planned for" units were enough to erase the shortage of housing for working families. Indeed, if units "planned for" dependably led to housing built, de Blasio could take credit for one of the most impressive initiatives imagined in New York: a master plan for developing Sunnyside Yard in Queens. This mile-and-a-half-long expanse of busy rail yard, jointly owned by Amtrak, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and General Motors, represents the scarcest commodity in New York City: 180 acres of open land. Drafted by the Manhattan-based Practice for Architecture and Urbanism (PAU), the Sunnyside Yard master plan was a thing of beauty—a deft mixture of different building types and generous open space, complete with illustrations of children playing in car-free streets. It looked more like Denmark or the Netherlands than Queens. And the written description was, if anything, even more upbeat: "12,000 new 100 percent affordable residential units, 60 acres of open public space, a new Sunnyside Station that connects Western Queens to the Greater New York region, 10 schools, 2 libraries, over 30 childcare centers, 5 health care facilities, and 5 million square feet of new commercial and manufacturing space that will enable middle-class job creation." It was (and remains) the most utopian thing I'd ever seen proposed for New York City. However, it was released in early March of 2020, on the eve of the pandemic shutdown of pretty much everything.

PAU's vision for Sunnyside Yard was, in fact, the feel-good antithesis of Manhattan's Hudson Yards. The two developments used the same strategy, decking over working rail yards to create a building site; the key difference was how the deck would be funded. At Hudson Yards, the developers paid for the deck, and everything they built on top of it was intended to help them recoup a billion-dollar investment. The beauty of the Sunnyside plan was that the city would build the deck. According to Adam Grossman Meagher, who was running the project for New York's Economic Development Corporation, the $5 billion that the city would have to spend on the portion of the deck that would support buildings was comparable to the amount the city would have to spend to acquire plain old land—except that nowhere in New York City does a comparable amount of land exist. Utopia, as it happens, doesn't come cheap.

Sunnyside Yard reminds us that accomplishing anything in New York requires decades.

At the time, the whole thing struck me as lovely but improbable, something that desperately needed to happen but, because of Covid and the fact that de Blasio was approaching the end of his second term, probably never would. Even during those awful months of early 2020, PAU's founder and creative director Vishaan Chakrabarti was surprisingly optimistic, seemingly able to see beyond the fog of Covid: "This is part of why you do master planning," he told me. "You don't know something like this is going to happen. But it tees things up for the future."

That future, however, came and went. The project, released too early in the pandemic and too late in de Blasio's tenure, has since gone "completely dormant," Chakrabarti told me in a recent conversation. Before anything could be built there, the yard would have to "be rezoned in accordance to the plan," and the MTA would have to kick-start the project by building a commuter rail station. The rezoning, which would've demanded an enormous amount of political will and acumen, and the existence of a rail station might have positioned the project for a "big federal grant to build a platform," Chakrabarti says, adding: "There's no way to build a platform without a federal grant. And this is what's so frustrating. Mayor Adams, when this plan was still fresh in people's minds…could have applied for Biden infrastructure money to build the platform." But he didn't. And the likelihood of a federal grant ended when Trump returned to office (the startling bromance between the president and the new mayor notwithstanding).

The Sunnyside Yard saga, however, reminds us that accomplishing anything major in New York City requires decades. A mayor (with the exception of Mike Bloomberg, who stuck around for three terms) is in office for a maximum of eight years. So Mamdani will have to get moving.

This is why smart mayors take advantage of—and need to build upon—the work done by their predecessors. As Marc Norman, the Silverstein Chair and associate dean of New York University's Schack Institute of Real Estate, recently told me, success for Mamdani—or any other mayor—requires using what's already in the pipeline: "A lot of it depends on who the mayor was before them."

In fact, Adams has helped Mamdani: The former mayor "had a very ambitious housing plan," Norman points out, one that Mamdani should find useful. Adams's incremental rezoning of the whole city, a plan known as the "City of Yes," offers the incoming mayor a toolkit and a set of strategies to allow more housing to be built in every type of New York City neighborhood.

The City of Yes plan is also projected to help generate 82,000 homes over the next 15 years by encouraging infill development: buildings with a couple of floors of apartments over retail in commercial areas; accessory dwelling units in single-family neighborhoods; and smaller units than had previously been allowed under New York's building

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codes. "Mamdani's going to be able to take credit for the things that happen under [the plan], even though it passed under Adams," Norman points out.

Even so, whatever City of Yes might facilitate, it's still not enough. For one thing, as a nation, we no longer build housing. The Faircloth Limit, drafted by North Carolina Senator Lauch Faircloth and signed in 1998 by President Bill Clinton, capped the number of public housing units in the United States at close to 1.28 million, the number that existed on October 1, 1999.

Today, housing is only indirectly funded by the Feds. Depending on whom you ask, this is either a blessing or a tragedy. The mid-20th-century practice of urban renewal, in which massive complexes were constructed that wound up serving as warehouses for the poorest of the poor, has been supplanted by a system that hinges on the private sector. Funding for affordable housing still comes from the federal government, but indirectly, in the form of low-income tax credits. The credits are given to developers of affordable housing, who sell those credits to investors. Public money is still an essential part of the package, but it's laundered through the private sector. As a result, the process of funding affordable housing is byzantine and slow-moving.

A number of private developers are experts at working the cumbersome system. For example, Jonathan F.P. Rose, the founder and CEO of Jonathan Rose Companies, has been building affordable housing since 1989. He's known for large-scale affordable and mixed-income projects and is currently developing Gowanus Green, a 100 percent affordable-housing development that includes 995 units in six buildings, on the site of a former gasworks in Brooklyn. The list of funding sources for the project is a mile long.

Like many others in the real estate world, Rose questions the value of Mamdani's proposed rent freeze and cites the potential for unintended consequences. He points out that half of the affordable-housing developments built with tax credits and owned by nonprofit organizations are already losing money and warns that "if they continue to lose money, they'll go bankrupt." As a private developer, the advice he has for Mamdani—and for the government in general—is unsurprising: "Get out of the way. We have a whole series of ridiculous regulations that just waste a whole lot of time."

Other private developers of affordable housing operate at a smaller scale. Andrea Kretchmer, a founding principal at Xenolith Partners, is about to close on a loan that will allow her firm to start the construction of a 95-unit building on the site of a former police station in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn. It was vacated by the city in the mid-1980s and, Kretchmer tells me, "a nonprofit in the neighborhood bought it and has been holding on to it since 2002, trying to figure out what to do with it. And we've been working for 11 years to get it financed and approved."

Note that it's taken over a decade for Kretchmer to assemble funding for a relatively small project. And even as developers like her angle for funding to create new affordable housing, existing units, for a variety of reasons, disappear. "We are losing units faster than we can replace them with new construction," she says. "It's like we are running on a treadmill that's going faster than you can run, and we're falling backwards."

Chakrabarti, meanwhile, has moved on from Sunnyside Yard. In 2023, he and his team at PAU did a research project for *The New York Times* called "How to Make Room for a Million More New Yorkers." It was a study of the city in which they "identified more than 1,700 acres of underutilized, developable land: vacant lots, single-story retail buildings, parking lots." They also included office buildings that could be converted into apartments. It was like a scavenger hunt in which they looked for places where more housing could be added without rezoning or changing the character of neighborhoods. Unlike Sunnyside Yard, though, this project is not at all utopian. Instead, it's a hyper-pragmatic approach to solving a problem, one that could serve as a template for Mamdani's housing goals.

Chakrabarti points out that "everyday working-class people in New York City can sometimes make up to six figures if they're union employees," but even those people "can't afford market-rate housing…and that's because the market's broken. Our big developers," he continues, "have zero interest in building 50-unit, transit-oriented developments in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. They are geared towards building 300-, 400-, 500-unit buildings."

Of course, much of the "affordable" housing that's been constructed in New York City over the past couple of decades has been generated by those same big developers. With a strategy called inclusionary zoning, developers can build taller or fatter towers if 20 or 30 percent of the apartments are set aside as "affordable." It's a clever end run around the funding issue, but—surprise!—it's not enough. In part, this is because the strategy—labeled "creating affordable housing out of thin air" by NYU's Furman Center—can succeed only in those parts of the city that are affluent enough to support the building's market-rate units, meaning that it won't work for many of the sites identified by Chakrabarti's mapping project. "We need a new family of small-scale developers who can, in a really unimpeded way, build working-class housing on those available sites," he contends.

When I mention Chakrabarti's theory to Kretchmer—that what we need is developers interested in turning parking lots into 50-unit buildings—she is enthusiastic: "You know, we like parking lots. That's our jam." And when I asked her about some other small firms doing work like Xenolith, she lists a number of them, including Type A Projects (another firm owned by women) and Kalel Companies. Clearly these developers exist.

The new mayor, meanwhile, has appointed Leila Borzog as the deputy mayor for housing and planning. She was the Adams administration's executive director for housing, so she knows what's in the pipeline, and as the deputy commissioner of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development under de Blasio, she helped organize a competition: Big Ideas for Small Lots NYC.

So parking lots could well be Mayor Mamdani's jam, too. His administration might be smart enough to effectively deploy what's already there, taking the City of Yes and running with it, shoehorning in non-luxury housing wherever it might fit. There are, for example, 20,714 surface parking lots in New York City, according to one survey. Not all of them need to be used for new housing, but redeveloping the city one parking lot, vacant lot, or disused commercial building at a time would move the dial in 50-unit increments until someday, eventually, there is enough. N

Doctor and Detective

The exposure therapy of A Private Life

BY LOVIA GYARKYE

SINCE HER BREAKOUT ROLE IN *TAXI DRIVER*, JODIE FOSTER has been known for delivering steely performances of impenetrable women. From the adolescent runaway turned sex worker in Martin Scorsese's gritty New York thriller to the FBI trainee negotiating with a cannibalistic serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs*, her characters are defined by a compelling recessiveness and relative social isolation. But lately, Foster has been trying to come out of her shell. "For somebody who is interested in privacy," she told *The Atlantic* in 2024, "I am obsessed with being understood."

This desire for a more legible interior life has led Foster to some unexpected roles. Take her turn in *Nyad*, an odd film about the athlete Diana Nyad's attempts to swim from Cuba to Florida. Foster plays Diana's friend, coach, and (at one point) partner, Bonnie Stoll, with a charming optimism, shedding her withdrawn, often self-protective posture to reveal an endearing lightness. Not only was this a rare display of on-screen exuberance, but it was the first time Foster—quiet about her own sexuality—had played an openly gay person.

If *Nyad* signaled Foster's interest in a different narrative, then *A Private Life*, her latest film, represents an unabashed commitment to self-exposure. Here she plays Lilian Steiner, an American psychoanalyst living in France, whose wayward investigation into a patient's death leads her down a path of intense vulnerability and reflection. The role is Foster's first lead performance completely in French, and it transforms her almost entirely into a different person. Her voice gains an airy lilt, her eyes seem softer when the camera closes in on her face, and she brings verve and a sense of order to an otherwise scattered film.

A Private Life kicks off with a dismissal and a death. Early in the film, one of Lilian's patients fires her, claiming that a hypnotist has cured him of his cigarette addiction more efficiently and at a fraction of the cost. Lilian, who maintains an inscrutable affect, seems more amused than hurt by the encounter. After all, she has plenty else to do: She must order blank tapes (she records every one of her therapeutic sessions) and figure out why another patient, Paula (Virginie Efira), has missed three sessions. Through these opening moments, Foster offers her audience a portrait of an emotionally reserved woman, a person tasked with helping others navigate their psychic landscape while remaining distant from her own.

This intimidating posture slackens after Lilian learns that her truant patient died by suicide not too long after their last session. The news launches her into an unfamiliar despair and a gnawing obsession. While *A Private Life* is by no means a noir, the work ahead of the analyst is now primarily detection. As much as Lilian is trying to understand why Paula decided to take her own life, she is also trying to understand herself. Soon the cracks in Lilian's cold exterior grow more apparent.

After learning about Paula's death, Lilian tries to go about her day. She visits her adult son, Julien (Vincent Lacoste), so he can purchase the blank tapes for her (the technology she uses is so old it must be ordered online). When Julien, harboring an obvious desperation for maternal affection, asks if Lilian would like to come see his baby, the practitioner refuses: Her eyes are wet; she's worried that she might have a cold. Later, Lilian becomes concerned that her vision might be impaired. But when she visits her optometrist, who also happens to be her ex-husband, Gabriel (Daniel Auteuil),

STILL FROM *A PRIVATE LIFE* (COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES)

Rome, take your amethyst back

with the earth
in it.

When the tourists land, the great
seminaries of Rome assign me the allowance
of worry.

And if my life were to close, I would close
with my implacable wrist.

Rome tells me to learn, but sometimes
I can hear the fitful whistling
drip in my eye around us and also within
us.

Love is nothing without lineage. Home is where
children are born, and it changes the earth.
How do you love, Earth?

Rome means the world is a poem, and between you and me,
the world flows in my temples
with the heart of time. It is eternal but then
it stops and the rain drips in.

God fills time with social things
like rain and the war and the land he captures
when he needs a new series. War is both sides
of a world.

Earth, you are too large
to be an image: you make
me hold
who isn't there.

I search for Rome in the water, I search for God
in the clay. But I can read the stars walking
in the language of my movement.

RICARDO MALDONADO

who is still deeply devoted to her despite their years of separation, the diagnosis is unexpected: Lilian, much to the surprise of both, is crying.

Desperate to stop this steady stream of tears, which now begins to plague her during her sessions and while she runs errands, Lilian resorts to the hypnotist who cured her other patient of his smoking habit. The encounter between Lilian and Jessica (Sophie Guillemin), a faux-bohemian type with long acrylic nails and tousled blonde hair, operates like a showdown between a heretic and an evangelist. "Stop confusing skepticism and intelligence," Jessica says to Lilian. "Your irony is an expression of fear."

Whether fueled by minor disdain or by desperation, Lilian submits to the rules of the session, which require the psychoanalyst to close her eyes and conjure images based on a series of prompts. The exercise plunges Lilian into a labyrinthine vision, set in the 1940s, that convinces her that Paula was her lover in a previous life and that what the police have ruled a suicide might actually be a murder.

As Lilian continues her hunt for the truth—about Paula and ultimately about herself—she sublimates the visceral feelings accompanying this dream scenario into her real-world investigation. She revisits the tapes from her sessions with Paula and conscripts Gabriel to go on a reconnaissance mission in the countryside. During her fact-finding journey, Lilian becomes the target of strange attacks—someone burglarizes her office, then her car gets keyed—which convinces her that she just might be onto something. But is she?

As she continues to collect evidence of Paula's murder, Lilian becomes haunted by a combination of guilt (for not being able to save her deceased patient) and longing. She thinks constantly of Paula and has flashbacks to their sessions, in which their banter develops a flirtatious tone. In those moments, which the film's director, Rebecca Zlotowski, and her cinematographer, George Lechaptois, imbue with dreamy tones, Foster's voice is pitched slightly higher, she smiles more easily, and her eyes—those expressive gems—twinkle with desire.

Outside of these phantasmagoric visions, Lilian finds that the reality around her is equally puzzling and dreamlike. Her feelings of guilt make it more difficult to trust in herself, and she starts to question her ability to read the world. A vulnerability begins to take root in Lilian's otherwise confident interior life, and an increasing psychic desperation comes to the fore. Foster's face becomes a striking vehicle for these signs of ambient stress, her performance defined by an evident restlessness: Once calm and stable, Lilian now seems increasingly frantic and obsessed.

As Lilian continues her downward spiral, brainstorming new reasons why Paula's husband (Mathieu Amalric) or daughter (Luàna Bajrami) might have wanted her dead, Zlotowski renders her obsession with a mix of Hitchcockian suspense and theatrical whimsy. On paper, this sounds like a wonderful blend of the horror and detective genres, a thriller in which the central character is thrust into a world of increasing uncertainty and insecurity. But despite its protagonist's psychoanalytical skills, *A Private Life* suffers from insufficient psychological probing. Key aspects of Lilian's life—such as her relationship with her late mother or her attraction to Paula—remain too oblique, as if the filmmakers' desire to avoid the risks of cliché far outweighed the need to provide satisfying character development. Highlighting the sapphic elements of Lilian's obsession or exploring the psychic frenzy of a therapist on the verge of a breakdown might have helped smooth out the dissonance between the film's psychologically acute hero and its own narrative obtuseness.

Thankfully, Foster's captivating performance dominates the film, and her unexpected charm becomes the real star of *A Private Life*. The actress surrenders to the waves of Lilian's temperamental journey: In one particularly striking moment, Foster brilliantly guides her character through a brutal scene in which Lilian relays some of the details of her psychic vision to her family—in particular, that her helpful, tape-ordering son Julien was actually a member of a Nazi-allied French Militia in a prior life and tried to arrest her. She also offers up her own interpretation of the dream: It was all about her stunted maternal instincts and why she's never felt comfortable around her own son. Lilian's self-analysis in this scene is cutting, bordering on cruel (even if accurate), and it ends with the American analyst feeling even more frustrated and defeated.

As *A Private Life* comes to an end, one begins to sense that the moments of revelation followed by long periods of fear or frustration are not only reflections of Lilian's internal psyche but a comment on life lived through a second language: The parts of a self that remain hidden in a primary language can emerge in surprising ways in a secondary one. In her memoir *In Other Words*, the English-language novelist Jhumpa Lahiri notes that when she writes in Italian, it's "without style, in a primitive way. I'm always uncertain. My sole intention, along with a blind but sincere faith, is to be understood, and to understand myself." One might say the same of Lilian—and of Foster, as well. No matter the calm assurance and confidence with which its protagonist opens the film, *A Private Life* is ultimately a study of the uncertainty and anxieties caused by embracing new modes of self-expression. **N**

Lovia Gyarkye is an editor at Hammer & Hope. *She last wrote for Books & the Arts on the film* After the Hunt.

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