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BRINK
A REVIEW
OF BOOKS
ISSUE NO. 03

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A CROSSROADS**

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**WHY
LIBERALISM
FAILED**

BY PATRICK DENEEN

**YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
248 PAGES
\$30.00**

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**LIBERALISM
AT A
CROSSROADS
ELLIOT
SETZER**

Nearly every one of the promises that were made by the architects and creators of liberalism has been shattered. The liberal state expands to control nearly every aspect of life while citizens regard government as a distant and uncontrollable power, one that only extends their sense of powerlessness by relentlessly advancing the project of 'globalization.' The only rights that seem secure today belong to those with sufficient wealth and position to protect them, and their autonomy ... is increasingly compromised by legal intent or technological fait accompli.

But the solution isn't more liberalism, institutional tinkering, or reforms to our political system, Deneen says. Our present problems don't stem from a failure to live up to liberal ideals. Rather, in some strange dialectic, liberalism "has failed because it has succeeded"—its disastrous effects spring from its central ideology. They are the system's features, not its bugs. "To call for the cures of liberalism's ills by applying more liberal measures," he argues, "is tantamount to throwing gas on a raging fire."

WHAT DENEEN SETS OUT TO ARGUE is that the political philosophy underlying American politics is utterly bankrupt. This diagnosis, and most importantly its timing, is why the book has received such broad attention. Very little is truly new here, and Deneen mainly rehashes critiques that Catholic conservatives have offered for decades, perhaps most notably in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Even so, *Why Liberalism Failed* offers a bold critique of contemporary American society and the ideas that underpin it.

The breadth of Deneen's critique—with chapters analyzing everything from politics and economics to education and science and technology—comes at the cost of nuance, but it also means that there is something for everyone. Deneen has received praise from across the ideological spectrum, including from Cornel West, who called the book "courageous and timely" in light of "the rude awakening of the Trump moment," adding that "if we remain tied to liberalism's failure, more inequality, repression, and spiritual emptiness await us." The diagnosis proposed in *Why Liberalism Failed* has also resonated with the right. Both David Brooks and Ross Douthat have written appreciative op-eds in *The New York Times*, and Gene Callahan has called the book "vitaly important for understanding the present crisis of Western politics" in the pages of *The American Conservative*.

The effect for most readers, liberal or conservative, must be simultaneous approval and scepticism. Deneen is critical of laissez-faire economics and a reliance on market mechanisms, and points to income inequality, climate change, resource depletion, groundwater contamination, and species extinction as evidence of liberalism's failure. Yet he's also critical of secularism and "infinitely fluid sexual identity," and sees declining birth rates and rising divorce rates as signs of cultural crisis. His comments on feminism offer an example: he approvingly cites the Marxist feminist theorist Nancy Fraser to comment on the exploitation of women in the "workforce of market capitalism," but then ultimately suggests that they might have been better off if they had never entered the workforce at all.

Why Liberalism Failed is a call for deep pessimism both about our current world and the achievements of modernity. While it appeals to sceptics of all stripes, not all are convinced by the apparent signs of decay. Interestingly, another strain of argument has appeared alongside it in the Trump era—one that seeks to reassure us that everything is totally fine. *Why Liberalism Failed* is, in effect, the direct antithesis of Stephen Pinker's new book *Enlightenment Now*, which claims that human beings are now flourishing. Pinker argues that human beings are healthier, richer, and better educated than ever before, and proposes that these advances are a direct result of the Enlightenment itself. Where Deneen claims that the ideas of the "Age of Revolutions" have failed, Pinker writes

TWO TRUTHS EXIST IN UNEASY TENSION: liberalism has triumphed over its opponents, and liberalism is in mortal decay. Under the first, we inhabit the so-called "end of history," where liberalism—with its focus on the rights and freedoms of the individual—has felled its main competitors, communism and fascism. Look around the world and we see liberal regimes, justified in liberal terms. *Pax Liberalis*, thy kingdom hath come.

Under the second, liberalism's fate hangs in the balance. The resurgence of illiberalism across Europe points to a profound unease with the status quo. In America, a political revolt against liberal elites yielded Donald J. Trump. Defenders of liberalism find themselves forced to acknowledge the disenchantment of the "other half," those disadvantaged by neoliberal economics and regarded contemptuously by the cultural elite of the coasts. *Bellum Americanum*.

How can we make sense of these competing truths? Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* claims to offer both an explanation and a call to action. He argues that both statements above are true: liberalism has failed precisely because it has succeeded. Though the book was completed immediately before the 2016 American election, it helps us understand what has happened since. Deneen calls liberalism the oldest and last major modern ideology to have "proposed transforming all aspects of human life to conform to a preconceived plan." But where the others have failed, liberalism has succeeded, shaping our modern culture, politics, and society. For Deneen, a professor of political science at Notre Dame, liberalism is essentially a 500-year-old wager that the world would improve if we re-ordered our politics.

Liberalism proposed that we conceive of humans as rights-bearing individuals who could fashion and pursue their own versions of the good life. This would be best achieved by a free-market economic system and a limited government legitimated by free-and-fair elections. Yet something has gone awry:

triumphantly that “the Enlightenment has *worked*.”* Where Pinker notes that economic growth has skyrocketed, Deneen highlights that wealth is concentrated in the hands of the one-percent. Where Pinker argues that the scientific revolution has drastically improved our quality of life, Deneen points out that this has come at the cost of environmental degradation that now threatens the existence of the species. Pinker claims that progress has materialized because people are free to get what they want. Deneen denies that freedom consists in an abundance of lifestyle choices.

What Pinker and Deneen have in common, however, is the all-or-nothing approach they take to their topics. Pinker refuses to acknowledge the idea that some things have gotten better while others have gotten worse; his exaggerated optimism leads him to dismiss any potential reservations about progress as trivial. Likewise, Deneen ignores the elements of liberalism that made it initially appealing. And when he does acknowledge those better elements—constitutionalism, limited government, individual rights—he claims that they in fact predate liberalism and can outlast it: “protection of rights of individuals and the belief in inviolable human dignity, if not always consistently recognized and practiced, were nevertheless philosophical achievements of premodern medieval Europe.” We can have our cake and eat it too.

At their root, both stories rest on secularized forms of Christian faith—either a faith in progress and the realization of God’s design, or a conviction that what we have witnessed is the fall of man. Nonetheless, Deneen’s argument explains much more than Pinker’s. Deneen offers a philosophy of history that explains not only why things have gotten so bad, but why they are bound to get worse: liberalism can never succeed because its underlying assumptions and ideas are ill-conceived. While Pinker gives a wealth of statistics proving how great things are,

reinterpretation—indeed, a whole new definition—of liberty and of the human person. Deneen bemoans the fact that while freedom for the pre-moderns meant virtue and the capacity for self-government, freedom now means liberation from all arbitrariness that determines us without our choosing—including liberation from authority, culture, tradition, and nature. Human beings are defined as fundamentally autonomous creatures, animals driven above all by self-interest. One consequence of this is that all human relationships—familial, neighborly, communal, and religious—are only legitimate if they are freely chosen. As a result, liberalism “teaches people to hedge commitments and adopt flexible relationships and bonds” and ultimately destroys the forms of unchosen attachment that hold communities together. Liberalism appeared to work for so long because it relied on pre-liberal resources to maintain a moral and cultural consensus, but over time it wore away these bonds without being able to replenish or replace them. Deneen holds that market mechanisms only function when local customs and cultures check the selfish desires of individual actors. What we are witnessing now is the triumph of depersonalized market relationships and the decline of any checks on corporate greed. Without these norms, the state enters to forcibly sustain order. All that is not restrained by law is permitted, rendering law the only tool that remains to guide conduct. In the absence of behavioural standards, Deneen claims, the only body that can combat the conflicts that arise is the state.

This leads to Deneen’s surprising next point: individualism and statism actually depend upon and reinforce one another. Having shorn communal and institutional ties that once offered sustenance, people are forced to turn to the state in times of need. Deneen views the main political options in the United States, embodied by the orthodoxy of the Democratic and Republican parties, as two sides of the same ideological coin—as merely two

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THE BREADTH OF DENEEN’S CRITIQUE—WITH CHAPTERS ANALYZING EVERYTHING FROM POLITICS AND ECONOMICS TO EDUCATION AND SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY—COMES AT THE COST OF NUANCE, BUT IT ALSO MEANS THAT THERE IS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE.

these provide no guarantee that things will continue that way. Because it fails to address the possibility of increased bloodshed, inequality, social disintegration, and climate catastrophe, his argument is unlikely to persuade anyone who doesn’t already believe the Leibnizian mantra that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

OF COURSE, Deneen doesn’t actually believe that liberalism has failed. It has not collapsed, which is why Deneen feels compelled to deal it a death blow. In fact, he indicates that without any intervention it is possible that liberalism could continue for quite some time. In his view, things could get much worse, and he indulges in speculation of a future “deep state” imposing liberal order by fiat despite a lack of popular support. This is why, perhaps counterintuitively, Deneen so forcefully tries to convince readers to reject liberalism.

He has two main arguments. First, while liberalism presents itself as a neutral system, it has actually sought to remake the world in its own image. It was founded on a

different forms of liberalism. He heaps scorn on both the Left and the Right. While so-called conservatives express hostility towards state expansion, they consistently turn to the state in order to create “free markets” and destroy all traditional norms that might prevent the market’s penetration into the life of a community. Like Bernard Harcourt’s *The Illusion of Free Markets*, he demonstrates that the market is a political creation that always required political and administrative regulation. In reality, today’s conservatives—from Paul Ryan to John Bolton—are classical liberals. And while progressives claim that an expansive state is the ultimate protector of individual liberty, Deneen notes that they seek to limit the role of the state when it comes to personal and sexual autonomy. Ultimately, both camps only further contribute to individual fragmentation, and both fail to address deregulation, globalization, and soaring economic inequalities. For all Americans who celebrate choice, political options in the Land of the Free start to seem meager.

IF LIBERALISM HAS FAILED, Deneen suggests that one possible outcome is to replace it with another system. So what comes after liberalism? His solution is a form of

localism, focused on sustaining culture within communities, fostering “household economics,” and creating forms of self-governance that include greater civic participation. Deneen proposes that we return to the land, grow our own food, and find small communities of like-minded others. In short, we should live like the Amish. It’s ultimately just a nominally secular version of what Rod Dreher calls “the Benedict option,” a social opt-out for Christians to maintain their faith by forming intentional communities and removing themselves from mainstream society.

Following such a forceful critique of the Western social order, Deneen’s alternative is underwhelming. But perhaps that’s the point. Deneen wants to avoid giving us a prescription. He evinces a profound scepticism of any pure theory that claims to tell us how to live, and instead seeks forms of life that originate in the creation of new traditions. “The impulse to devise a new and better political theory in the wake of liberalism’s simultaneous triumph and demise is a temptation that must be resisted,” he writes. “The search for a comprehensive theory is what gave rise to liberalism and successor ideologies in the first place.” Instead, what we need is not a better theory but better praxis.

And yet for someone so adamant about escaping the clutches of ideology, Deneen imputes a great deal of agency to liberalism. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, it is liberalism—and not any particular writers, politicians, or social reformers—that drives history. Deneen writes as though liberalism has its own beliefs, executes its own plans, and takes its own actions. We are all liberalism’s victims, he claims. But where are its perpetrators?

This is why *Why Liberalism Failed* fails. Liberalism is not an agent. Nor is it a coherent idea with a unified form, but rather a series of ideas and political movements that evolved over time. Deneen presents its failure as inevitable—a result of its inner contradictions—and makes the current moment seem predestined from liberalism’s creation. He does this by overstating the importance of autonomy as the singularly liberal value, and by collapsing what were historically distinct demands for freedom into a single doctrine. In the process, he collapses diverse thinkers into a single monolithic progression from the past to the present. He believes, rather anachronistically, that thinkers ranging from Luther and Hobbes to Machiavelli and Rousseau were all working to establish liberalism, an idea which would have been foreign—if not outrageous—to most of them. Freedom from religious persecution, from foreign domination, and from arbitrary rule are all distinct demands. While later demands for freedom built upon the successes of earlier struggles, our current world was not determined at the outset of modernity.

**DEPOSITIONS:
ROBERTO BURLE MARX
AND PUBLIC LANDSCAPES
UNDER DICTATORSHIP**

**BY CATHERINE SEAVITT
NORDENSON**

**UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
336 PAGES
\$45.00**

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**TRANSLATING
MARX BURLE
ISADORA
MILANEZ**

MILITARY DICTATORSHIP, popular culture suggests, is gray, cold, and orderly. Its abuses of power take place on well-paved roads in uniformly dense cities containing only right angles. Its grocery stores have only beige foods, and its schoolchildren sing songs in high-pitched horror-movie unison. Its marching policemen all lift their knees to the same height. Gardens, parks, backyards, and topiary structures, one would imagine, are low on the state's priority list.

Not so in dictatorial Brazil, where prominent landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx spent the thirties to the sixties designing tableaux that were part tropical paradise, part modernist utopia. His designs draw out striking contrasts between the natural and built environment by juxtaposing lanky palm trees with refined *azulejo* mosaics, or graceful constructed waterways with desert flora. His Parque do Flamengo in Rio de Janeiro looks at once like a series of amoebas and a collection of flying discs carving clean lines into the bushy green landscape. Whimsical though they may be, his designs also represent an arm of the Brazilian dictatorial state: Burle Marx served in the Federal Council of Culture during the country's second dictatorship, and many of his works were commissioned by top state officials.

Between 1967 and 1974, Burle Marx delivered a series of position pieces to the Federal Council of Culture from his position as one of the council's appointees. Catherine Seavitt Nordenson, a landscape architect and associate professor of architecture at the City College of New York, provides original translations and context for the writings of Burle Marx in *Depositions: Roberto Burle Marx and Public Landscapes Under Dictatorship* (2018). Though readers might come into *Depositions* familiar with the political implications of urban planning or architecture, Seavitt Nordenson demonstrates that in Brazil during the 1960s, even landscape architecture was political. The book's introduction offers the uninitiated reader a clear introduction to the key forces in Brazilian politics of the time: the 1964 coup that resulted in a military dictatorship,

the so-called Brazilian economic miracle of the seventies that urbanized the country, and the national desire for modernization and progress that fueled massive investment in infrastructure and development. It was during this time that Burle Marx gave his depositions on a variety of aesthetic and political issues, from advocacy for national park preservation to which architectural flourishes were the ugliest ("sculptures of heroes," "poorly pruned trees"). Despite Burle Marx's position within a brutally repressive state regime, the depositions appeal to emotions, common sense, and the law to defy the dictatorship's stance on development and endorse the preservation of Brazil's flora and fauna.

Seavitt Nordenson fills her text with photographs, renderings, and blueprints of Burle Marx's work that ask us to consider the connection between his visual artistry and textual advocacy. Devoid of people, the landscapes could just as easily be mockups, yet they are familiar to those who have walked through Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, or São Paulo. *Oh, so that was Burle Marx's too?* With kaleidoscopic glasses, I revisit my quotidian familiarity with these environments in light of Burle Marx's vision for them as planned and political. In their physical materiality, the landscapes are incontrovertible testaments to the fact that beyond these orations, something was built. Yet there is something outside the gardens' physicality that haunts. As my mind's eye revisits the shimmering, transforming views of the Parque do Flamengo, I wonder whether their aesthetics, and indeed their place in my life, can be separated from the project of their inception. Especially in today's political climate, in which political trials explode months before a national election, the gardens are uncomfortable reminders of the dictatorial state.

Through their juxtapositions with the text and with each other, Seavitt Nordenson's curatorial choices in *Depositions* are a collage in their own right. The interplay between artistic intent and viewer interpretation gives the volume layers—the more it is picked up, leafed through, and put down again, the more it reveals meaning. Yet her critical commentary on the broader visual culture of Brazil during the sixties is often lacking. Offering images of political events, Brazilian heads of state, and works by other artists, she remarks that the images "reveal what is not said," but refrains from providing her own commentary about what *is* said, or what *she* might say. She chooses to depict Getúlio Vargas, the fourteenth president of Brazil, grinning wildly atop a horse, bearing closer resemblance to a child on a show pony than a head of state in an equestrian pose. Was this Seavitt Nordenson's way of conveying derision for the president-turned-dictator? Or was the image simply comical, a tickling gem of the archive she hoped would see the light of day? Images like these are as intriguing as they are puzzling.

As a work of translation, *Depositions* delivers. Seavitt Nordenson is an excellent translator: technical terms, colloquial language, and idioms flow without a hitch. She is also discriminating, careful to translate necessary words while not overburdening us with excessive vocabulary. Her work as a translator is particularly vital because so few of Burle Marx's depositions have been translated into English, and much of the supplementary material she draws upon is only available in Portuguese. More importantly, the book helps us reflect on the ideological opportunities of translation. Seavitt Nordenson's desire for readers to "take Burle Marx at his word" reveals the importance of bringing new angles of engagement to our American-centered critique. For example, she points out that Burle Marx's insistence on the compatibility between economic development and ecological preservation cannot be derived from the two American schools of natural preservation exemplified by John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Burle Marx's perspective is something new entirely, and we would be wise to investigate the "union of nature and nationhood" he exemplifies. By undertaking the translation project that is *Depositions*, Seavitt Nordenson injects new life into the English-language discourse on landscape architecture and on modernism's reverberations across the world.

Yet *Depositions* is far from a mere translation of Burle Marx's transcribed orations. Seavitt Nordenson provides a critical and historical framework with which to interpret his depositions. Precisely because so little of this work has been translated, its content is largely unfamiliar to non-Portuguese-speaking audiences. The choices Seavitt Nordenson makes to contextualize the depositions thus have a profound role in shaping how the reader will view Burle Marx's work and the history of Brazilian state-sponsored architecture more broadly. In that light, great responsibility rests on Seavitt Nordenson's shoulders, and at times she does not carry through.

One of Seavitt Nordenson's great strengths is her clarity in conveying the history of Brazil's military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. Her account combines the succinctness of a crash-course textbook with the allure of walking through a gallery of Brazil's notable moments. The nagging question that remains, however, is whether the story of the great men of the dictatorship was the right one to tell. It is certainly critical to understanding Burle Marx's oeuvre that we consider its historical context and his participation in the project of national progress, even if his work aimed to criticize it from within. Seavitt Nordenson sells us on the idea that landscape architecture is political insofar as it was done for the great political movers and shakers of Brazil. Yet Seavitt Nordenson's historical sketch is the cookie cutter one: she tells us of the modernist artists like Mário de Andrade and Anita Malfatti, the heads of state like Vargas, and all the pertinent elites with which Brazilian schools familiarize their students. She is often concerned with high art and how Burle Marx fits within the small world that was in constant conversation with European artists and thinkers like Le Corbusier. She also emphasizes the precedent for Burle Marx's work in the colonial gardens of the Portuguese court, highlighting the Europe-Brazil connection as though it were natural and inevitable. American scholars tend to believe that if

Burle Marx's work, noting that he was more concerned with advancing the "culture of the environment" than advocating for "individual human rights." Indeed, she notes that his decision to work for the military regime was "ethically fraught," but she does not dive into what these ethics entail. As readers, we miss the opportunity to consider how the utopia of the ecologically-minded elite affected the *candangos*, because the *candangos'* history and context do not rank high enough on the list of Seavitt Nordenson's concerns. Rather than rewriting the *candangos'* history to accompany Burle Marx's work, Seavitt Nordenson replicates the stories of power Brazilians already know so that English-speaking audiences can participate in its reproduction.

Oddly, in a book dedicated to the designs of Burle Marx, we don't get to know much at all about Burle Marx the person. By piecing together details, we determine that Burle Marx was safe in his status within Brazil's white intelligentsia. Seavitt Nordenson reveals this in subtle ways, like when she notes that he developed close ties to people with political power early in his career. Yet without a deep investigation of Burle Marx's background, her cross-examination of his work—and its political implications—seems lacking. Beyond her gloss on Burle Marx's fraught complicity with the dictatorship, Seavitt Nordenson avoids holding Burle Marx accountable for how his utopic visions could undermine the interests of common people. Burle Marx seems to spend all of his time thinking about the distribution of flora and no time thinking about the distribution of people, particularly indigenous people, who inhabit it. If Burle Marx did not consider them, Seavitt Nordenson should have. What motivated Burle Marx? Should we read his ecological depositions as resistance against the military regime, as Seavitt Nordenson suggests, if he hardly challenged its oppression? Were there moments of uncertainty, guilt, betrayal? An increased emphasis on Burle Marx's

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ESPECIALLY IN TODAY'S POLITICAL CLIMATE, IN WHICH POLITICAL TRIALS EXPLODE MONTHS BEFORE A NATIONAL ELECTION, THE GARDENS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE REMINDERS OF THE DICTATORIAL STATE.

you tell the elite's story of the Global South, you get the story right—Seavitt Nordenson falls squarely into this trap. Fixated on the stories that Brazilians in power already tell, she misses the opportunity to elaborate on another way in which landscape architecture is political: the way it moves and shapes the non-elites.

In some moments, this angle emerges. Seavitt Nordenson remarks that the plan for the zoo botanical garden in Brasília would have displaced people in Candangolândia, a settlement for workers brought in to build the city. She also points out Burle Marx's grappling with how his landscapes might bulldoze over *favelas*. Yet Seavitt Nordenson fails to mention that the *candangos* after whom Candangolândia is named were primarily black and brown, usually the poorest residents of the adjacent states willing to do itinerant work for the wealthy bureaucrats who envisioned a utopic city. Upon the completion of Brazil's capital, the *candangos* were expected either to return to their former homes or to live in satellite cities far from the main metropolis. In short, the *candangos* were envisioned from the start as a disposable labor force that would not participate in the project their labor helped create. Seavitt Nordenson acknowledges this tension in

biography and the effect of his landscapes on the non-elites might have brought us to the final way in which landscape architecture is political: it is political only insofar as it is personal.

**RADICAL
SACRIFICE**

BY TERRY EAGLETON

**YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
216 PAGES
\$25.00**

**STAYING
THE KNIFE
AVIGAYIL
HALPERN**

THE BACK COVER OF TERRY EAGLETON'S *RADICAL SACRIFICE*

bills the book as an “analysis of sacrifice as the foundation of the modern, as well as the ancient, social order.” This is an exciting proposition for exploration, with the potential to provide a new way of conceptualizing what religion can offer to our understandings of society. Disappointingly, *Radical Sacrifice* does not deliver on this ambitious goal. Almost the entirety of Eagleton's slim volume reads as a literature review rather than a manifesto full of innovative ideas. Despite consistently stunning prose, reading *Radical Sacrifice* often feels like being stuck in conversation at a cocktail party with a philosophy major acutely aware of how well-read he is.

The titles of the book's five chapters promise to address hot topics in culture, history, and metaphysics: “Radical Sacrifice,” “Tragedy and Crucifixion,” “Martyrdom and Mortality,” “Exchange and Excess,” and finally “Kings and Beggars.” The eponymous first chapter is the only one in which Eagleton's purported topic is addressed at any length; the following chapters, with the exception of the final pages of “Kings and Beggars,” cover ideas only loosely connected to the idea of sacrifice, and even then bringing the themes together requires some real intellectual legwork. Eagleton leaves that work for the reader, instead presenting atomized units that discuss, in order, the nature of the Crucifixion, death, gift-giving, and the scapegoat. (As the reader will notice, the chapter titles are sometimes helpful and sometimes misleading.)

Eagleton, who is writing from a Catholic Marxist perspective, confidently informs the reader that his book “broods on questions not commonly investigated by the political left, and certainly not by its postmodern wing. Love, death, suffering, sacrifice, evil, martyrdom, forgiveness and so on are not exactly modish preoccupations among cultural or political theorists today.” To bring these questions into postmodern academic discourse is an admirable goal, but in attempting to do so, Eagleton ignores those who have been working with them outside his own intellectual milieu and thus puts forth a shortsighted argument.

EAGLETON BELIEVES THAT SACRIFICE is a crucial model for modern politics. He begins with a compelling argument: “if sacrifice is a political act, it is not least because it concerns an accession to power.” He says that “[s]acrifice concerns the passage of the lowly, unremarkable thing from weakness to power...If sacrifice is often violent, it is because the depth of the change it promises cannot be a matter of smooth evolution or simple continuity.” This is an appealing notion for the religious leftist reader: it is a framework for the transformation of the downtrodden into the powerful, an alchemic formula that transforms the weak into the strong. In a world where religion is deployed to prop up unjust and cruel uses of power, to use religious discourse to argue for the political—not just spiritual—power of the weak is innovative. Eagleton's attempt to do so is praiseworthy. In imagining sacrifice as the transformation of the downtrodden to the powerful, he offers a metaphysical grounding for a leftist political project.

But where does this framework of sacrifice come from? Eagleton does not provide a satisfying genealogy. *Radical Sacrifice* is a book that quotes frequently and at length. Each page is replete with references to philosophy and literature; Eagleton cites sources ranging from Hegel to Shakespeare. (*King Lear* is a particular favorite.) Of course, the two-and-a-half centuries between Hegel and Shakespeare are not the only ones available to Eagleton; still, one often gets the sense that the quotations in *Radical Sacrifice* are the selections of an erudite man remembering something he already knows rather than the result of novel research. Although the text strives, per the introduction, not to “take the dismissive attitude to theology generally to be found among left wingers,” one notes the absence of any theologian writing after Thomas Aquinas. There is great merit in seeking to use sources from one's own area of expertise and intellectual lineage to answer new and important questions. However, Eagleton's seeming ignorance of sources outside of his postmodern critical framework leads to an impoverished analysis of his subject. There exist libraries upon libraries of liberal Christian and non-Christian theology that Eagleton does not so much as mention and which could have deeply enhanced his argument. His blinders in this area are a significant obstacle to both the coherence of his theory and its trustworthiness.

EAGLETON'S NOTION OF SACRIFICE depends on Christian supersessionist attitudes towards Judaism. Supersessionism is the perspective which, as David Novak defines it, “sees Judaism and the Jewish people as that which the triumph of Christianity over history has left in the irretrievable past.”* “In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ He [Jesus] has made the first one obsolete,” says Paul in Hebrews 8:13. God had made a covenant with the Jews, but once Jesus came, Christians became true participants in God's covenant, and Jews, who had rejected Jesus as the messiah, were no longer deserving of that covenantal relationship. Supersessionism, which had been the dominant approach to Jews and Judaism within Christianity until modern reckonings with anti-Semitism, treats Jesus as the “fulfillment” of Jewish Law, bringing the Law to its telos and thus ending its claims on the faithful.

The supersessionist attitude towards the Law goes beyond rejecting it or treating it as obsolete. Paul says of the Law that “[t]he sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:46). The Law he is referring to is what was at the time becoming rabbinic law. The stereotype that treats this Law as antithetical to love and mercy, and therefore the Jews who follow it as cruel and hardhearted, has been used to justify anti-Semitism for centuries. The prototypical example of this is, of course, Shakespeare's Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, who insists in *The Merchant of Venice* on receiving the pound of flesh he is owed despite the human cost.

Among the best-known moments in *The Merchant of Venice* is Portia's speech about mercy. Dressed as a man and pretending to be a lawyer, Portia argues that Shylock ought to spare Antonio from giving the pound of flesh he has promised as a guarantee for his friend Bassanio, Antonio having found himself unable to repay the loan in

cash. Shylock has refused Bassanio's offer of twice the money he is owed, insisting instead on the contractual pound of flesh. Portia entreats Shylock to be merciful:

It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. (IV.i.179-197)

Portia contrasts Shylock's drive for justice, for being given what he is owed, with mercy. It is not justice, that strict insistence on rule-following, that will bring salvation, she contends. It is mercy, which is a defining attribute of God. The implication behind these arguments is clear: the Law has been superseded not merely because it is outdated, but because it is barbarous. This is a paradigm that has permeated Western society for centuries, and it is one that Eagleton buys wholeheartedly.

IN OUR MODERN, MULTICULTURAL, LIBERAL SOCIETY, it is taken for granted that Judaism is one religion among many, part of a grand conversation among equally valid visions of divine service and meaning. But Eagleton's text demonstrates that this is not yet the case in some branches of Christian thought. In explaining how sacrifice moved from a physical ritual to the concept he wishes to discuss, Eagleton asserts that "it was the exile of the Israelites and the destruction of the Temple that forced the moral or spiritual aspects of sacrifice to the fore." It is certainly accurate that the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Romans in the year 70 CE led to a religious reckoning, both in emerging Rabbinic Judaism as

non-sacrificial ritual practice. Eagleton's statement treats Christianity as the inevitable—and only—replacement of Temple sacrifice. It is perhaps this troubling assumption that leads to the greatest problem in his work: the conflation of sacrifice and martyrdom.

By the end of the first chapter, Eagleton has shifted from a discussion of cultic ritual sacrifice and its nature to the martyrdom of Jesus. In attempting to reconcile how the Biblical prophets can both endorse sacrifice and claim that it is inadequate, he concludes that "[t]he oblation that counts is the surrender of one's selfish interests for the sake of others," and then proceeds to assume that "the surrender of one's selfish interests" is identical with the surrender of one's very life.

Without the slightest acknowledgement of a transition from one subject to another, Eagleton begins to discuss the Crucifixion's political nature: "[i]t is the tale of a how sacrifice as selfless devotion is likely to result in a bloody execution at the hands of the state." Though Eagleton devotes an entire chapter to the nature of martyrdom, he in no place acknowledges that martyrdom is not a mere subcategory of sacrifice. There is a world of difference between sacrificing something that belongs to oneself and sacrificing one's very life.

By treating the death of Jesus as the paradigmatic sacrifice and the historical culmination of such acts, Eagleton not only creates a framework for understanding leftism that is dangerous in its political expectations, but also actively participates in a history of Christian supersessionism that has done great violence to Jews and that continues to ignore the enduring value and relevance of the Law to a living group. Eagleton believes that the Law "is perverse to the core...Though it is blameless in itself, it resembles the kind of grossly inadequate parent who can do no more than rub our noses in where we go wrong." He

EAGLETON NOT ONLY CREATES A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING LEFTISM THAT IS DANGEROUS IN ITS POLITICAL EXPECTATIONS, BUT ALSO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATES IN A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN SUPERSESSIONISM THAT HAS DONE GREAT VIOLENCE TO JEWS AND THAT CONTINUES TO IGNORE THE ENDURING VALUE AND RELEVANCE OF THE LAW TO A LIVING GROUP.

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well as in the developing Jesus movement. Both groups increasingly prioritized abstract thinking and ideas, in a transition from the stark physicality of animal sacrifice. However, Eagleton goes on to claim, "acts of love and mercy came to assume place of pride over donations of corn or the shedding of lambs' blood. It is the lowly of spirit who are great in God's esteem, not goats or handfuls of grain."

This analysis of the transition from cultic Temple sacrifice to a different form of religious practice is one that assumes that the rightful successor to the Jewish Temple cult is the Christian religion. It is only in Christianity that "acts of love and mercy" have the "place of pride." Though love and mercy are of course important in Judaism, the central religious emphasis is the study of legal text and

adds that "it is a useful device for the moral tenderfoot, even if it proves superfluous for those who have spiritually come of age. The Law is a ladder to be kicked away once we have mounted it."

For Jewish readers who consider themselves bound to follow the Law, this is plainly insulting, a dig at a meaningful model of community and service of God, and an assertion that Jews have not "spiritually come of age." But as modern Christians—in particular Catholics post-Vatican II—work to rectify their long history of anti-Semitism, the concept of the Law has been decoupled in Christian thought from the idea of the Jewish commitment to it. The Law is a "vindictive campaign to bring us to nothing," says Eagleton, not a defining idea for any real people. By abstracting a concept that is in reality a present and vibrant

force in the lives of many Jews, Eagleton articulates what would, in a medieval text, read as an attack on Jews.

Eagleton's reduction of the Law to an abstract, noxious force not anchored in any real lives is disturbing, but it is consonant with strands of modern Christian discourse that deride the Law as merciless without directing that criticism at those who observe the Law. More distressing still is his intellectual abstraction from the lives and suffering of Jews.

In "Kings and Beggars," his final chapter, Eagleton devotes much ink to a discussion of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the Muselmann. The "Muselmänner" were those Jews who, forced into concentration camps during the Holocaust, had in their starvation and despair given up on life. The term originated in the camps themselves and has been used by numerous survivors in written and oral testimony. The horror of these people's lives is still present in living memory, but Eagleton treats this horror as simply an academic curiosity, an example of "a kind of living death." He claims that "this ravaged creature is not even tragic, at least in the classical sense of a protagonist raised by his death to sublime status" and adds that "[t]he Muselmann offers men and women an icon of their own inhumanity, without a confession of which there would be no possibility of redemption."

The only source Eagleton draws from on the Muselmann is Agamben's book, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a philosophical analysis of survivors' testimony of the death camp. He cites no Jewish scholars and certainly no Jewish survivors. Real Jews here are as invisible to Eagleton as they are in his discussion of the Law. Eagleton treats Jewish death as being noteworthy only when it can raise a victim to "sublime status." He ignores a rich literature of Jewish post-Holocaust theology to instead instrumentalize the suffering and murder of Jews within his Christian philosophical project. Eagleton's Muselmann is not a person but a "ravaged creature" and an "icon." Auschwitz is an interesting moment in the history of ideas, not the site of a genocide. Jews exist in Eagleton's thought only as obsolete half-siblings or as victims, paradigms of death. This is an act of intellectual violence.

EAGLETON'S THEORIZING is built on a disregard for Jews and Jewish bodies as well as the assumption that Jews are only relevant insofar as they participate in—or, really, represent ideas that are important to—his Christian framework. But any attempt to create a Christian metaphysics compatible with contemporary leftist ideology must grapple with supersessionism. Christianity has historically been the source of terrible violence: in the form of missionary work, conquest, pogroms, and more. This gory heritage is one with intellectual underpinnings, and supersessionism is implicated in tremendous Jewish suffering. There are theologians doing that work, but Eagleton, with his intellectual blinkers, does not concern himself with them. He thus illustrates the potential pitfalls of a leftism based in Christian thought.

In the final twenty pages of the book, where he at long last makes his argument, Eagleton proposes that the proletariat equals the scapegoat equals Jesus. The scapegoat is powerful, he says, because

the more besmirched it becomes, staggering under the weight of the transgressions heaped on its head, the more admirably selfless it shows itself to be. Its redemptive power grows as its identification with human sin deepens, which is one reason why the sacrificial beast, like all sacred things, is both blessed and cursed. The scapegoat is an unthinkable animal, at once guilty and innocent, blessed and cursed, poison and cure.

Karl Marx, says Eagleton, views the scapegoat as a "revolutionary agent." Eagleton writes,

Like the sacrificial tribute, it signifies the gain of humanity through the loss of it. Because the poor have less

of a stake in the status quo than the well-heeled, they have less to lose from the impending upheaval which Marx calls Communism and Christian Gospel calls the Kingdom of God, and are thus more likely to be open to its advent. Only by living its wretched condition to the full can it hope to annul it, and in doing so abolish itself. Seen in this light, revolution is a modern version of what the ancient world knew as sacrifice.

This is a politics that cherishes the suffering of the weak until the moment it can be made useful. It is the hazard of a religion based on the fetishization of the act of ultimate sacrifice. To understand suffering as beautiful, and to transfigure or import that idea into a political ideology, is to wager victory at the expense of those who are suffering. Uplifting the idea of wretchedness will lead to wretchedness being preserved. Weakness must never go unaddressed in an attempt to create change. An ideology that glorifies pain is one that will allow pain to continue. Suffering is never beautiful.

EAGLETON'S SUPERSESSIONISM and his advocacy of self-sacrifice as the ideal model for modern Marxism are not unrelated. Because he views Jesus's death as the ultimate moment of sacrifice, the purest distillation of the idea, he does not consider the possibility of a model in which sacrifice can stop short of one's own life.

Judaism offers another option. In the *Ein Yaakov*, a collection of all of the stories in the Talmud, one finds a dispute about which verse is the most important in the Bible. The scholar Ben Azzai suggests that it is Genesis 5:1, "this is the record of Adam's line," the account of Creation. Rabbi Akiva offers that it is "love your fellow as yourself." Shimon ben Pazi, by contrast, offers a less intuitive answer in Exodus 29:39: "You shall offer the one lamb in the morning, and you shall offer the other lamb at twilight." This is the commandment to offer the *Korban Tamid*, the daily offering in the Temple, a model of sacrifice in which one dedicates all the days of one's life to a transcendent ideal, not through offering one's life in suffering but by committing to daily work. The revolution Eagleton seeks will not be found in martyrdom but in achievable sacrifices, regularly offered.

Revolution to create a just world does not require death. It instead demands a life oriented towards the pursuit of a set of ultimate ideals. There is radicalism in regular observances—indeed, in Law. To commit oneself daily to a set of transcendent precepts, precepts that defy conventional logic and cut against the less explicit but no less present rules of a fundamentally unjust society, is also revolutionary. To adhere to Divine Law, the Law of a God who, as in Christianity, is hopelessly in love with humanity, instead of the fickle and malleable norms of a culture that elevates individual success over care for each of God's beloved children, is a means of making this love manifest through consistent, small actions.

In his supersessionist bias, Eagleton misses an opportunity to draw from an alternate Biblical picture of a human life offered on an altar. If the Binding of Isaac—which Eagleton mentions only once, in passing—is a simple prefiguration of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, then it does not add to our understanding of sacrifice. But taken on its own terms, the *Akedah* is a vision of martyrdom as sacrifice in which it is possible to suffer but not die, to sacrifice much of what one has without sacrificing oneself, to be on the altar but for God to stay the knife. What if we had a politics that treated each life not as valuable enough to sacrifice, but as too valuable?

* David Novak, "Beyond Supersessionism," *First Things*, March 1998, www.firstthings.com/article/1998/03/005-beyond-supersessionism.

GENOCIDE AND ETHNIC CLEANSING IN OUR TIMES: FROM THE HOLOCAUST TO THE ROHINGYAS

BEN KIERNAN

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IN AUGUST 1941, Winston Churchill described Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union: "whole districts are being exterminated...Since the Mongol invasions of Europe in the Sixteenth Century, there has never been methodical, merciless butchery on such a scale..We are in the presence of a crime without a name." News was also leaking out about the ongoing Nazi slaughter of nearly six million Jews in Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic states, and other Nazi-occupied territories. In 1943, the Polish Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin coined the term "genocide" for the Holocaust of the Jews, the Armenian Genocide in World War One, and other cases in global history. In 1945, the world said "Never Again."

The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide came into force as an international treaty in 1950. It has been signed and ratified by 140 nations. The Convention defines genocide as acts such as "killing members of the group" that are perpetrated with the intent to destroy, "in whole or in part," a "national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such." Acts of genocide also include "[d]eliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part."

Three points are worth making about genocide in international law:

- 1) Political and social groups are not protected by the Genocide Convention—only national, ethnic, racial and religious groups. Social scientists object to this. Judges have to ignore them.
- 2) It is not necessary for a perpetrator to intend to destroy an *entire* group. Acts committed with the intent to destroy a *substantial part* of a protected group constitute genocide.
- 3) The perpetrator's motive is not mentioned in the 1948 Convention. The particular motive or purpose of the crime is irrelevant in determining guilt. Racial hatred, like that of the Nazis for Jews, may be the main

motive. But the motive for other genocides may be, for instance, territorial conquest, economic gain, or religious domination. The intent is what matters: that the destruction of the group is consciously desired. So, although the Holocaust gave rise to the term "genocide," not all cases of genocide are the same, or perhaps as extreme, as the Holocaust.

The term "ethnic cleansing" was used in World War Two and then again by Bosnian Serbs in the 1990s. It means the forcible *expulsion* of a community from its home region. Ethnic cleansing can be accomplished by committing genocidal massacres to terrorise survivors and make them flee, or it can be achieved without genocide. But it too is a crime against international law. In 2002 the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ratified by 119 states) recognized that forced displacement and deportation, even in peacetime, constitute crimes against humanity when they are "committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population."

Since the Nazi Holocaust, "extermination" has also been a crime against humanity. Extermination is slightly different from genocide. It includes massacres, but also "the intentional infliction of conditions of life," that is "calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population." The purpose of these crimes is not relevant to guilt, nor do charges of crimes against humanity require proof of specific "intent to destroy" a group. And in the case of a crime against humanity like extermination, unlike genocide, the persecuted group could be a social or a political group.

Although many regard genocide as a twentieth-century phenomenon, only the term itself and the 1948 criminalization of the act are specific to the twentieth century. Similar acts, and similar concepts, have existed for millennia. Examples are mentioned in the Bible, and by Thucydides. Rome committed genocide against Carthage in 146 BC. Crusaders perpetrated genocidal massacres against Jews in Europe and against Arabs and Jews in Palestine. Mongols committed genocide against several thriving cities in the thirteenth century. In the fifteenth, Vietnam perpetrated genocide against the neighbouring kingdom of Champa. In the sixteenth century Spaniards did so in Hispaniola, as did Japanese invading forces in Korea.

Though the term "genocide" did not yet exist, the concept and the acts did, and other terms served. In 1574 England's Earl of Essex drew up a plan for Ulster, to ensure that "the Rebell shalbe utterlie extirped." O'Neill resistance, Essex wrote to London, demanded war "to expulse him, and utterlie to roote him out, or else so to weaken him by takinge awaie his dependantes." To achieve that, Essex's troops surprised several hundred Clandeboyne O'Neills at a Christmas feast, and slaughtered them. Essex sent London an unconvincing denial: "I never mente to unpeople the Cuntrey Clandyboy of their naturall inhabitantes." But he had.

Soon afterwards in the southern Irish province of Munster, an English officer wrote of "pitifull murther, for man, woman and child were put to the sworde." Captain William Pelham recorded how in 1580, "We...executed the people wherever we found them." The Earl of Ormond reported putting to the sword "about 4000 common people caught in cabin and field." The Irish *Annals of the Four Masters* recorded that "they killed blind and feeble men, women, boys and girls, sick persons, idiots and old people".

Edmund Spenser described how English forces then starved Munster by preventing people from farming. "Out of every corner of the woods and glynnes they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legges could not beare them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves;...that in a short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentifull countrey suddainely left voyde of man and beast." Lord Burghley said that Munster had been "dispeopled."

As European colonialism expanded across the world and settlers took up new lands from indigenous peoples, they provoked local resistance, and genocide was sometimes the result. Almost the entire continents of North America, Australia, and Africa were conquered by American and European empires in the nineteenth century alone. Genocides occurred on all three continents.

By 1900, the world had become smaller, the great powers greater, and contests for territory closely fought. A new phenomenon emerged: genocides perpetrated by dictatorships that had seized control of tottering, shrinking, or new empires, aiming to reverse territorial losses or conquer new regions from established powers.

The twentieth century offered mass murderers new technological, political, or organizational opportunities. Large-scale armaments production, telegraph communications, widespread civilian enlistment into military organizations, and rapid mass transportation by land and sea all facilitated projects as ambitious and extensive as genocide. The advent of “total war” and totalitarianism now offered prospective genocidists not only cover and ideological rationales for their crimes but unprecedented efficiency.

Greater population pressure on the land also increased the numbers of potential victims. The estimated worldwide population, which doubled to nearly 1 billion from 1500 to 1800, almost doubled again in the nineteenth century, to around 1.75 billion people by 1910. Land became scarcer, and human resources in less demand. For expansionist regimes, mass killing now presented potentially greater benefits with less risk of labor shortages. For new twentieth-century totalitarian party-states propounding race or class ideologies, entire groups of people became inimical or expendable. While the Nazis pursued their racial victims and territorial conquests, the Communist giants, Stalin's USSR and Mao's China, pursued mass killing of domestic political enemies and social “classes.”

During the Cold War that followed the Nazis' defeat, political massacres and genocides occurred on both sides. In 1965–66, the U.S.-backed Indonesian army supervised the murder of half a million or more communists and alleged communists, and then went on a decade later to invade East Timor and kill another hundred thousand people in what a UN-sponsored Truth Commission called “extermination as a crime against humanity.” In 1971 the Pakistani military conducted a genocide in Bangladesh, and in 1975 Pol Pot's Cambodian Communist Party took power and subjected Cambodia to a genocide that ended 1.7 million lives in four years. The Guatemalan military regime committed genocide against ethnic Mayan Indians in 1981–83.

Throughout this Cold War period, the 1948 Genocide Convention was never enforced. The United States did not even ratify the Convention until 1988.

The end of the Cold War saw no reduction in the occurrence of genocides, but it finally ushered in the first enforcement of the Genocide Convention. War crimes committed in Bosnia provoked the UN Security Council to establish the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia to try perpetrators like Ratko Mladic. Then the 1994 Rwandan genocide of the country's Tutsi minority, in three months the fastest episode of mass killing since the Holocaust, obliged the UN to set up another tribunal for Rwanda. In 1998, the former mayor of Kigali became the first person to be convicted of genocide in an international court, fifty years after the Genocide Convention came into being.

As the court found in convicting Mladic last year, the massacre of Bosnian Muslim men at Srebrenica in 1995 fit the international legal definition of genocide. To “totally destroy North Korea,” a country of 25 million people, as Donald Trump threatened to do in 2017, would also be to commit genocide. The same applies to the threats of Kim Jong-un's North Korean regime, which asserted: “The four islands of the [Japanese] archipelago should be sunken into the sea by the nuclear bomb,” adding that “Japan is

no longer needed to exist near us.” And, the statement went on, “Let's reduce the U.S. mainland into ashes and darkness.” North Korea and the United States are both signatories to the Genocide Convention. In Trump's case it was unprecedented for a leader of a state that has signed it to mount a U.N. platform, as he did in the General Assembly last year, and flout this core component of international criminal law. The UN Security Council, of which the United States is a member, is charged with implementing the Convention, and Trump's threats of genocide, even if not carried out, only weakened its mandate.

In 2017 the fate of the Rohingyas in Burma, or Myanmar, became the most pressing current case of ethnic cleansing. In September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called their mistreatment a “textbook example” of ethnic cleansing. UN Secretary-General António Guterres added: “When one third of the Rohingya population had to flee the country, can you find a better word to describe it?” By the end of 2017, about 700,000 Rohingyas had fled into Bangladesh.

A Muslim minority of approximately 1.4 million in a largely Buddhist country, Rohingyas have lived in the Arakan region of what is now Burma since the 15th century or earlier. In 1799, the British scholar Francis Buchanan wrote of the Rohingya people as “long settled in Arakan.” He mentioned “three dialects, spoken in the Burma Empire, but evidently derived from the language of the Hindu nation.” One was “that spoken by the Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan.”¹

When British colonial rule ended in 1948, the Rohingyas became citizens of a democratic, independent Union of Burma. But the Burmese army seized power there in 1962, and deprived Rohingyas of their citizenship in 1982. Meanwhile military abuses and pressure on them only increased.

In 1978, more than 200,000 Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh from their homes in Burma's Rakhine (Arakan) State. From late 1991 to mid-1992, another 250,000 Rohingya refugees crossed the border. Burmese military personnel had reportedly warned two women who arrived in Bangladesh in January 1994 that they should leave the country. “Why are you staying here?” they asked one of the women, who was “specifically told by the military that she would be beaten by the military personnel.”²

The oppression continued, provoking resistance, and escalated into the current crisis after the 2015 elections brought into government the longtime political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). On October 9, 2016, “Rohingya men and boys armed mostly with sticks and knives attacked three police outposts, reportedly killing nine police.” In a massive overreaction, the Myanmar Army led attacks “on Rohingya civilians in approximately 40 villages in Maungdaw Township, displacing more than 94,000 civilians.”³

On August 25, 2017, a small Rohingya insurgent group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked military posts. The army, now alleging that the insurgents were affiliated with the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), escalated its attacks on Rohingyas as a group. Commentator John Pennington noted that ARSA's predecessor organization, The Faith Movement, “was launched in 2012 by exiled Rohingyas in Saudi Arabia,” but that “there is no evidence suggesting ARSA and ISIS have joined forces.”⁴

In December 2017, the head of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, took the matter to another level when he said that “that Myanmar's security forces may be guilty of committing genocide.” On February 1, 2018, the Associated Press published detailed evidence of five mass graves of Rohingya victims of “systematic slaughter.”⁵

The U.N. special envoy on human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, concurred that the Myanmar army's violence against Rohingya Muslims bears “the hallmarks of a genocide.” Lee told reporters that she couldn't make

a definitive declaration about genocide until a credible international tribunal or court had weighed the evidence, but “we are seeing signs and it is building up to that.” She described her recent visit to refugee camps in Bangladesh and other areas in the region to discuss the Rohingya crisis. The government of Myanmar refused her entrance to the country.

Yanghee Lee added that “we’ve called for a fact finding mission...and access for international media” to the areas in northern Rakhine state where the Rohingya live. Lee said that Myanmar’s actions were “amounting to crimes against humanity.” “These are part of the hallmarks of a genocide,” she said. “I think Myanmar needs to get rid of this baggage of ‘did you or did you not,’ and if proven that they did, then there has to be responsibility and accountability. No stones must be left unturned because the people, the victims, the families of the victims definitely deserve an answer,” she went on.⁶

Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini, head of the UN Human Rights Council, reiterated this accusation more strongly on March 7, when he warned that the brutal treatment of Rohingya Muslims by the government of Myanmar since August 2017 may be classified as “acts of genocide.”⁷ He told the Human Rights Council of the bulldozing of mass graves in what he considers a “deliberate attempt by the authorities to destroy evidence of potential international crimes, including possible crimes against humanity.”

After decades of military violence against them, and the NLD’s silent neglect, it is perhaps predictable that ISIS might find some sympathizers among the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees. Targeting all Rohingya, however, is ethnic cleansing or genocide, an international crime. China aids the Burmese regime and shields it from UN Security Council action, while the Burmese military, backed by Aung San Suu Kyi, has continued to block a UN inquiry commission.⁸

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In the absence of an official UN commission, over a 21-month period the non-government organization Fortify Rights gathered testimony from 254 survivors, officials and aid workers. On July 19, 2018, it released a 162-page report entitled “*They Gave Them Long Swords: Preparations for Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity Against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar*.” This report documented “eight crimes against humanity—murder, extermination, rape, deportation or forcible transfer, torture, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, and persecution—as well as three acts of genocide committed with a special intent to destroy the Rohingya in whole or in part.”⁹

Importantly, the report also documented the preparations, which began after the attacks of October 2016, for these crimes. According to Fortify Rights, from that date “the Myanmar military and civilian authorities: 1) “disarmed” Rohingya civilians, systematically collecting sharp or blunt objects from Rohingya civilian homes; 2) systematically tore down fencing and other structures around Rohingya homes, providing the military with a greater line-of-sight on civilians; 3) trained and armed local non-Rohingya citizens in northern Rakhine State; 4) deprived Rohingya civilians of food and other aid, systematically weakening them physically; 5) built up state security forces in northern Rakhine State to unnecessary levels;” and imposed discriminatory curfews against Rohingya civilians.¹⁰

The 2017 crimes against humanity and genocide were perpetrated by at least 27 army combat battalions composed of 11,000 troops and 900 members of three police combat battalions.¹¹

Fortify Rights also reported that in both 2016 and 2017, “a large number of soldiers acting under military control” committed crimes in northern Rakhine State without interruption over many months, “in a similar fashion throughout multiple locations.” In some cases, “Myanmar Army commanders were physically present while assemblages of soldiers raped and gang-raped women and girls, fatally shot and cut the throats of men, women, and children,

and burned people to death, including infant children. Eyewitness testimony shows that in multiple locations and on similar timelines, Myanmar Army soldiers massacred large numbers of civilians and discarded their bodies in mass graves or burned piles of bodies, all in the presence of large numbers of soldiers. The fact that different bands of soldiers performed these same actions repeatedly and across disparate locations further suggests knowledge by commanders of the crimes.”¹²

The genocidal persecution of the Rohingyas and the purported appearance of ISIS in Burma are symptoms of the challenges the international community faces. The 2003 US/UK invasion of Iraq, based on the false premise of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and conducted without UN support, spawned an international insurgency that transformed into ISIS. It seized territory in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. It conducted genocide against Yazidis in Iraq, ethnic cleansing against Shia Muslims and Arab Christians, and war crimes against Kurdish, Iraqi and Syrian forces. Now losing ground in the Middle East, ISIS is active in Southeast Asia. Its fearful reputation, and the apparently false report of its activity in Myanmar have only fuelled the violent Islamophobia of the Burmese military and Rakhine Buddhist activists, and sparked off the region’s worst episode of ethnic cleansing and quite possibly genocide since Pol Pot’s genocide of ethnic Vietnamese and Cham Muslims in the late 1970s.

While the Myanmar military was carrying out criminal acts against the Rohingya people in 2017, Donald Trump was threatening to “totally destroy” North Korea, and China blocked any UN investigation into the plight of the Rohingyas. The great powers must reform their reckless rhetoric and dangerous policies, and set to work to tackle this continuing international tragedy. The United States and China should cooperate with the UN to end genocide.

- 1 Francis Buchanan, "A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire," *Asiatic Researches* 5 (1799): 219-240, reprinted in *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol. 1, No., 1, 2003, www.soas.ac.uk/sbbr/editions/file64276.pdf, p. 55.
- 2 U.S. Committee for Refugees, *The Return of the Rohingya Refugees to Burma: Voluntary Repatriation or Refoulement?*, Issue Paper, Washington, D.C., 1995, pp. 1, 3, 13.
- 3 "They Gave Them Long Swords": Preparations for Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity Against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar, Fortify Rights, July 2018, www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/Fortify_Rights_Long_Swords_July_2018.pdf, p. 11.
- 4 "What are the links between the Rakhine Crisis and ISIS?," *ASEAN Today*, October 23, 2017, www.aseantoday.com/2017/10/what-are-the-links-between-the-rakhine-crisis-and-isis.
- 5 "AP finds mass graves, latest evidence of Rohingya genocide in Myanmar", CBS, Associated Press, February 1, 2018, www.cbsnews.com/news/myanmar-mass-graves-latest-rohingya-slaughter-genocide-ap.
- 6 "UN says Myanmar's treatment of Rohingya Muslims has the 'hallmarks of genocide'", *Business Insider*, Associated Press, February 1, 2018, www.businessinsider.com/un-says-myanmars-treatment-of-rohingya-muslims-has-the-hallmarks-of-genocide-2018-2.
- 7 Stephanie Nebehay and Simon Lewis, "Acts of genocide' suspected Against Rohingya in Myanmar: U.N.," *Reuters*, March 7, 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-rights/acts-of-genocide-suspected-against-rohingya-in-myanmar-u-n-idUSKCN1GJ163.
- 8 "They Gave Them Long Swords," p. 40.
- 9 Ibid., p. 13.
- 10 Ibid., p. 41.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 14, 115, 131; see also Hannah Beech, "Myanmar Military is Accused of Plotting Genocide," *New York Times*, July 20, 2018.
- 12 "They Gave Them Long Swords," p. 123.

A POEM

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**AT
OXENHOLME
RAILWAY
STATION
TIANA WANG**

The train, the hour—late, late late.
Sipping warm lemonade from a glass bottle,
I stare at the men who have been drinking since ten this morning.
An old tradition, they say: this stumbling along the yellow stripes
of the platform, this laughter at the mention of green fairies
 near the lakes,
spots of strange color. I must turn away.
Earlier, I was busy
dropping gingerbread crumbs on William
and Dorothy's graves, fumbling
for an umbrella in the light rain. In Keswick
artists had set up shop at a little church
that smelled of strong perfume. "Poetry,"
one was called. I dabbed a little on my wrists. The scent
comes home on my jacket sleeves.
It was hard to resist collecting the portraits
of sheep, posed like a close family, in lovely Ambleside,
and at a leather and fur store I ran my fingers
through coarse Herdwick wool.
In Grasmere I bought a postcard for fifty pence in loose change
and told myself I was doing it right. It was also right
to tour Dove Cottage at half past two, before the rain got too bad,
but it might have been more right to go at three
when the bird in his cuckoo clock came out. Wordsworth,
the guide announced, loved that clock. Loves? He
is the Lake District's great son, still. They are rather proud,
the three drunk men. One of them borrows
my multicolored pen to write his email on an old football ticket.
The scrawled letters run together on the damp paper.
His friend lights a cigarette in the grey drizzle. The train pulls
 into the station.
I am a face in the window with eyes fixed north.

THE AMERICAN PLAN THE NATION FORGOT

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SCOTT STERN

**THE TRIALS OF
NINA MCCALL:
SEX, SURVEILLANCE,
AND THE DECADES-
LONG GOVERNMENT
PLAN TO IMPRISON
“PROMISCUOUS” WOMEN**

BY SCOTT W. STERN

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Between World War I and 1980, tens of thousands of American women were arrested without due process and quarantined on the suspicion that they were prostitutes, sexually promiscuous, or carried a sexually transmitted infection. The program to incarcerate suspicious women, which had support in every state and at every level of the federal government, was known as the “American Plan.” It is the subject of Scott W. Stern’s recent book, *The Trials Of Nina McCall* (Beacon Press, 2018). Stern, who is in his second year at Yale Law School, began researching the American Plan as an undergraduate at Yale College. He spoke with BRINK about the American Plan and the ways its victims resisted persecution. Below is an edited and condensed transcript of the interview.

BRINK: WHAT WAS THE AMERICAN PLAN?

STERN: The American Plan was the system under which U.S. government officials locked up tens, probably hundreds of thousands of women without due process in what were essentially concentration camps. They did this because they suspected the women had sexually transmitted infections, syphilis or gonorrhea, or because they suspected the women were prostitutes, or they simply suspected that the women were promiscuous. This started in World War I, and it was justified as protecting the national security by protecting soldiers from wayward women who were going to infect them with STIs. But it wasn’t entirely justified by that because the Plan continued for decades after WWI. It continued through WWII into the fifties, and in some places into the sixties and seventies. All of the laws that enabled the American Plan remain on the books to this day.

B: WHO IN GOVERNMENT KNEW ABOUT THIS? HOW FAR UP THE CHAIN OF COMMAND DID THE AMERICAN PLAN GO?

S: Everyone knew, from the president of the United States on down. This was in large part funded at the federal level by Woodrow Wilson, in a sense personally. He dispersed money from what was basically a WWI-era presidential slush fund in order to construct federally funded detention facilities for women. People who played a role in

the American Plan included John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who funded the Plan at the federal level; Eliot Ness, who ran the federal agency that oversaw the American Plan during WWII; Earl Warren, as state attorney general and then governor of California. Eleanor Roosevelt was complicit. Her husband Franklin was complicit. Dwight D. Eisenhower was a big fan. Fiorello La Guardia was a big fan. People in every level of government and every branch of government were complicit, if not active fans. There were very few voices of dissent within the government and very few voices of dissent without the government—with the exception of a handful of committed activists, reformers, and journalists, and the incarcerated women themselves.

B: DID THE AVERAGE AMERICAN KNOW ABOUT THE PLAN?

S: That’s a complicated question. Sexually transmitted infections were incredibly stigmatized in the early- to mid-twentieth century. The surgeon general himself was not allowed to say the word syphilis on the radio in 1934. It was hard to write about in the newspaper. People did, they just did so with euphemism. Most people were aware what was going on. There are a lot of records of government agents writing to each other about what people on the street were talking about. Certainly, the women who were behind bars had their free speech curtailed. But this was something that was, at the time, widely known.

B: THE TRIALS OF NINA MCCALL IS FILLED WITH THE MANY WAYS WOMEN FOUGHT BACK AGAINST THE AMERICAN PLAN. WHO WERE THESE WOMEN, AND WHAT DID THEIR RESISTANCE LOOK LIKE?

S: As a rule, they were lower-income, they were disproportionately women of color, and they were women who were perceived by men and women in power as sexually promiscuous. But at the time that could mean so many things. It could be a woman out on a date with a man, a woman seen walking alone, a woman sitting in a restaurant alone, a woman drinking alcohol. All of those women were suspicious enough to get detained, forcibly examined for an STI and, if she tested positive, incarcerated without due process.

The prostitutes themselves began conducting a series of highly rigorous studies to document that they were not, in fact, common vectors of infection. The reason for that is pretty simple: the rate of female-to-male vaginal transmission is very low. And they conducted a number of studies to prove that. These studies were published in *The Lancet*, in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Women from [the rights organization Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics] COYOTE and other organizations testified before state legislatures in order to push back against proposals that they be mass-tested or quarantined. That has largely been forgotten.

What’s also largely been forgotten is the role in this of Robert Redfield, President Trump’s Director of the Center for Disease Control. In 1984, Robert Redfield, who was a physician at Walter Reed Naval Hospital, released a study that he had done on some 41 soldiers. He found that a large number of soldiers infected with HIV had been infected by female prostitutes. A number of people at the time pointed out that this was probably inaccurate, because the studies relied on men reporting this themselves. And of course these men were not going to report that they had been injecting drugs or sleeping with other men. But this study was widely publicized and it launched calls across the nation for the quarantining of prostitutes. Robert Redfield later oversaw the mass testing of military recruits, which led anyone trying to get into the military who tested positive to be barred from the military. Those already in the military were isolated in treatment wards that some called leper colonies. It led at least one soldier to try and kill himself.

For the American Plan’s entire existence, from the 1910s up through the sixties and seventies, women fought back vigorously. It’s impossible to say with any exactness, but hundreds if not thousands of women escaped from their detention facilities. Hundreds if not thousands of women

rioted, physically fought back against their captors. A huge number of their detention facilities caught fire and a number of fires, we know, were set by the female inmates themselves. There are records of women holding hunger strikes. There are records of women speaking out in the press. I found the record of a woman who leapt from a moving train rather than go to one of these detention facilities. I found the record of a woman jumping out of a window to her death rather than remain in a detention facility. Women resisted in so many ways.

Another common method of resistance involved suing the government. This at a time when it was very difficult for stigmatized women to get access to counsel and then to have their case heard in court. Still, a lot of women sued the government, and we know this because of the number of cases that reached appellate courts. We also know that the government tried very hard to suppress these lawsuits. Federal agents put a ton of pressure on the American Bar Association to in turn put pressure on its lawyers not to represent these women. And, in some cases, the ABA did that. Federal agents also put pressure on judges not to go easy on these women. Nonetheless, women continued to sue and in a couple cases won. Still, the laws themselves were never overturned.

B: HOW DID THE AMERICAN PLAN END?

S: The American Plan operated on a local level for most of its history. Every state and hundreds of cities across the country passed laws enabling local officials to detain, examine, and incarcerate women. The Plan ended in various places in different times. In some places we can pinpoint an exact moment when it ended. In other places it just faded out. This happened in the fifties, in the sixties, and in the seventies. In San Francisco, into the mid-1970s officials continued to detain and hold women without due process for 72 hours and examine them for STIs. They had been ordered to stop doing this in the late forties, but officials just didn't comply. The Plan really ended in San Francisco because of the rise of the Sex Workers' Rights Movement. There was an organization called Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics, COYOTE, which was founded by a remarkable woman named Margo St. James, who is still alive, that advocated for the decriminalization of sex work and prostitution. It advocated for their voice in medicine and in the political process, and it was largely motivated in the early days by the lingering remnants of the American Plan. COYOTE launched protests, did their own investigations, and eventually they partnered with the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] to sue Alameda County and they won. In one jurisdiction, the judge said that if they wanted to enforce these American Plan laws, they'd have to enforce them equally against men and women, and so of course male officials stopped enforcing it. This betrayed the fundamental sexism of the program.

B: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE 1980S WITH HIV/AIDS VIS-À-VIS THE AMERICAN PLAN?

S: It's important to remember that all of the American Plan laws remain on the books in some form to this day. In the early eighties, when the epidemic broke out, there were surprisingly few calls for quarantine. That was because people thought AIDS was something only a couple populations could get—gay men, Haitians, IV drug users, and hemophiliacs, the so-called Four-H's. But a couple explosive media incidents happened in 1984 and 1985—including the death of Rock Hudson, and the widely publicized arrest of a sex worker in New Haven, Connecticut—that led the general population to believe that they too were at risk, that straight people too might get this. That launched in mid-1985 a state of incredibly punitive attempts to police those with AIDS or those suspected of having AIDS, especially prostitutes and sex workers. And officials repeatedly said, "we have these laws on the books from the American Plan, maybe we should use them again." And so you saw dozens of states across the country consider quarantining people on a large scale. Polls suggested

that huge numbers of Americans supported that. Many states specifically added AIDS to the list of conditions that could be quarantined. And there were a handful of cases of quarantine across the country, mostly of sex workers. Thankfully, it was not put in place on any broad scale—in part because of the activism of sex workers and people with AIDS themselves, who launched protests and did their own studies and who in very real ways fought back.

B: THE OFFICIALS IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN CITED CONCERNS OVER PUBLIC HEALTH. HOW CREDIBLE DO YOU THINK THOSE CLAIMS WERE?

S: For much of the twentieth century—before the advent of sulfa drugs and penicillin—STIs did run rampant. Huge percentages of people had syphilis or gonorrhea. They were difficult to treat and they were unpleasant. There is reason to believe that syphilis and gonorrhea were among the largest causes of disability that the American army suffered during WWI and around that time.

That said, this program made no sense at all from a public health standpoint. For one, if you're going to quarantine people to prevent a transmissible infection, it doesn't make sense to quarantine just half the public—that is, women but no men. There were a couple men incarcerated under the plan, but very few. It's not a sensible approach to public health. Rather, it's a means of controlling women. Second, the ostensible reason they were incarcerating women was to treat them for STIs. But they did not have effective treatments back then. The most common treatment at the time was an injection of mercury. Another common treatment was an injection of arsenic-based drugs. These things did very little to cure you of your infection. They did, however, hurt tremendously, and caused all kinds of terrible, painful side effects. And, if continued long enough, they could kill you.

It's also important to remember that the diagnostic mechanisms for syphilis and gonorrhea were very flawed at the time. There's reason to believe that the Wasserman examination, which was the most common blood test for syphilis at the time, could have a false positive rate up to 25 percent. The test for gonorrhea involved the visual inspection of microscopic slides, which was notoriously unreliable. So again, from a public health standpoint, this just doesn't make sense.

B: BUT DID PEOPLE THINK THAT AT THE TIME? AS YOU CITE, THERE WERE MANY STUDIES SHOWING, WE NOW KNOW ERRONEOUSLY, THAT 90 PERCENT OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS WERE TRANSMITTED BY PROSTITUTES.

S: Those studies were based on flawed science, and there are a number of scholars who have demonstrated that. People were not aware generally that the diagnostic techniques were really pretty unreliable. That was not widely known. The limitations on the medical treatment were fairly well known. And it's important not to look back at historical actors like physicians and think, "Boy, people used to be so stupid." That's not a sensible approach to the history of medicine; it's not a sensible approach to history. But people were generally aware that there were extreme limitations to what they could accomplish with these medical treatments. And there are instances in which you see people talk about or write about the incarceration of women as a form of punishment and not as a form of treatment.

There's an example of a health agent in California saying to a lawyer, "If I wanted, I could go arrest your wife." It was clearly used as a tool of power. It was fundamentally about controlling women, about controlling infection.

B: IF IT'S UNPRODUCTIVE TO SAY HISTORICAL ACTORS WERE STUPID, IS IT PRODUCTIVE THEN TO SAY THAT THEY WERE MISOGYNISTIC, RACIST, CLASSIST?

S: I think the answer is yes. But I think it's important not to see them as uniquely or distinctly misogynistic, or

racist, or classist. Because that risks celebrating who we are right now. In my opinion, our society remains fundamentally sexist and racist and classist. It's important to honestly assess people in the past, even people who we lionize, like Earl Warren or Eleanor Roosevelt, because it's important to see these continuities, see how the carceral regime that began in the early twentieth century has effects to this day, and the philosophy that it cemented about women persists to this day. We still disproportionately police women who sell sex and arrest the men who purchase that sex at a much, much lower rate. We still disproportionately detain women of color for these crimes. And very importantly, the physical facilities that housed women under the American Plan in many cases exist to this day. There are continuities here we should remember.

B: WHAT ABOUT ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, SOMEONE WIDELY REGARDED AS A CHAMPION OF CIVIL RIGHTS? SHE'S NOT PORTRAYED FLATTERINGLY IN YOUR BOOK. WHAT ARE WE TO DO WITH SOMEONE LIKE HER?

S: We should treat Eleanor Roosevelt as someone of her time, and at her time an elite woman like herself would've had very negative impressions of sexually promiscuous women, of sexually liberated women. At the same time, though, Eleanor Roosevelt was a person with agency. She certainly had the ability to make her own choices and in this case made profoundly wrong choices. She raised money for an organization that was integral to the incarceration of thousands of women. She was at meetings at which federal agents talked about locking up thousands of women, and she did not object. She was totally aware of the American Plan and did not speak out, while she was speaking out about a number of other social ills, a number of other bigoted programs. So while we should not treat her as some sort of uniquely evil figure, and we should remember all the good that she did, we should also see her as having done some less than good things, and see her as fundamentally a product of her time and place and class, which is to say a somewhat close-minded person.

B: YOU WRITE THAT THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN PLAN HAS NOT JUST BEEN FORGOTTEN BUT ACTIVELY BURIED. HOW?

S: First, there's the intentional suppression of the free speech of these women. There are a number of cases in which they were denied access to counsel. Most facilities that incarcerated these women refused to allow visitors so they couldn't tell people what was happening. Their mail was read, and so they couldn't write what was truly happening when they were inside these facilities. In all those ways, their stories were buried.

Probably more importantly, elite men and women played a role in the maintenance of a culture that so stigmatized incarceration, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual promiscuity that women simply weren't able to talk about this. It was too stigmatized. They wouldn't be able to get jobs if they talked about this. They certainly wouldn't be able to find partners if they talked about this. And newspapers simply wouldn't print these words in a lot of cases. In all these ways, their stories have not just been forgotten but intentionally obscured.

B: YOU DON'T BUY THAT THESE LOCAL ENFORCERS WERE SIMPLY DOING THEIR JOB AS ORDERED FROM ON HIGH, THAT THEY WERE FOOT SOLDIERS IN A WAR THAT WASN'T THEIR MAKING.

S: No, I don't, because this literally wasn't coming from on high. It may have started as a top-down program during World War I but officials continued to enforce this from the twenties through the sixties. And they could have stopped it at any time. But they didn't, because they didn't see anything wrong with this. In fact, officials male and female believed they were helping these women. They knew what they were doing, they made choices, they had agency, of course we should view them as products of their time but it's also important to view them as people with the ability to choose. And they chose to

lock thousands of women up in what some women called concentration camps.

B: HOW DO YOU UNCOVER THIS STORY AND NOT EMERGE DEEPLY PESSIMISTIC?

S: You do become incredibly pessimistic, and there's no escaping that. How would you feel if your sister, or your mother, or your girlfriend were walking down the street and were detained, examined in the most personal way imaginable, and then locked away without a trial, for months, to be pumped full of poison and then released and told that she was less-than? How would you feel? It's profoundly unfair, and I think everyone can grasp that.

We've been taught so many mythologized and sanitized versions of history that it's depressing, I think, to read what actually happened. What uplifts me at the end of the day is the resistance from the women who were incarcerated. The fact that people fought back against great odds and in some cases won, and even when they lost continued to fight back, and that people fight back to this day—that's what gets me out of bed in the morning.

**AS IF:
IDEALIZATION
AND IDEALS**

**BY KWAME
ANTHONY APPIAH**

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**I CANNOT
TELL A LIE
SARAH NGO
HAMERLING**

political economy—and the political language—that it can shelter?

Kwame Anthony Appiah's new book on an old problem of representation, *As If: Idealization and Ideals*, could easily have shared a title with the works of Greenspan and Houellebecq. Instead, he wisely steers clear of well-trodden metaphors, even as he embraces and illuminates their underlying logic. Appiah is concerned with the ubiquity of “idealization”—proceeding “as if” what we know to be strictly false were true—in diverse academic disciplines and realms of human activity. “We need many pictures of the world to do anything—to do science, to do ethics, to do politics,” he said in a recent interview. These pictures are always “going to be imperfect...it's only useful if it leaves stuff out.”⁴

Appiah lifts his definition of idealization from the vocabulary of the philosophy of science, and his framework roughly from the work of Hans Vaihinger, a little-known Kant scholar who published *The Philosophy of 'As If'* in 1911. Appiah's argument, at first glance, appears to be less about substance (it does not aim “to announce any startling discoveries”) than about relevance: the book offers itself as an amicable, erudite, and at times hurried 180-page advertisement for the concept of idealization as a vital topic of research beyond its narrow origins. We make simplifying assumptions in scientific models or political philosophy, Appiah explains, even though we know that gases are not colliding point masses, people are not in full compliance with norms of justice, and nation-states are not fully independent Westphalian sovereigns. We describe rational agents in economics, even though we know that real people are not optimal profit-maximizers with perfectly rational expectations. We respond emotionally to theater, even though we know that no one really dies. And, Appiah argues, we ascribe identities of race or sexual orientation to ourselves and to others, even though we hold that these categories are fictional.

Regardless of their content, idealizations may be justified—and necessary—on the pragmatic grounds that they are “useful for managing the world, including, sometimes, ourselves.” We need idealized models in so many fields not because they are true (they aren't), but because they make the world intelligible to us, and equip us with the cognitive resources to act upon it, where a true representation would be impossible for us or unsuited to our purposes. Appiah reminds the reader again and again that the question that defines and justifies an idealization is: “For what purposes is the assumption useful?” Idealizations are the tools and preconditions of human agency.

OF ALL OF LEWIS CARROLL'S FANTASTICAL WORLDS, one of the most enduring and impossible is a simple map. In response to a Victorian traveler's explanation that the largest useful scale of a map is about six inches to the mile, one of his characters exclaims: “Only *six inches!* We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a *hundred yards* to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a *mile to the mile!*” Yet the map remains folded in disuse, as farmers objected that the map would block the sunlight: “So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.”¹

The gap Carroll charted between map and territory—between representation and reality—has since become wide enough to fit a host of enemy ideologies from diverse and far-flung disciplines. The tattered remains of Carroll's one-to-one scale map litter the once-conquered desert, a disused fantasy of empire in Borges' “On Exactitude in Science”; in Baudrillard's critique of US imperialism, it is instead the territory “whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map.”² In the past seven years, Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, and Michel Houellebecq, author of *Submission*, published books with the same title: *The Map and the Territory*.

Carroll's articulation of the problem of representation—the impossibility and uselessness of a perfect representation, the necessity of an imperfect and thus strictly false map—has had a long afterlife. The image of the map and the territory occurs so pervasively, in such a wide variety of contexts, that it can fade into the problem it seeks to represent, appearing to have no content of its own. But how is it that the fable of the one-to-one map has proven so remarkably elastic, accommodating both critics of imperialism and mourners of empire, free market deregulators and post-Keynesian Marxists,³ abstruse postmodernists and hard-nosed economists? Why is it that the map and the territory is how we pose the question of representation, and what constraints does Carroll's formula place on its answers? What are the limits of the

AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION, economic idealizations have increasingly become subject to public scrutiny. From populist and leftist discourse to behavioral economics and crisis memoirs like Greenspan's *The Map and the Territory*, critiques of rational choice theory as ideal—or as plain falsehood—have been in vogue. While its first and third chapters mostly summarize and reframe existing scholarship, *As If* presents its most original contributions in the second chapter: an extended, partially vindicating treatment of the probability theory behind rational choice, a beloved subject of Appiah's for over thirty years.

Subjective preference and probability provide the scaffolding for modern economics. In order to model a utility-maximizing agent's free choice under uncertainty, an economist must be able to calculate and compare her expected utility of each option. That is, we need to be able to quantify both the desirability of the possible outcomes of each option to the agent, and the likelihood of each possible outcome, as assessed by the agent.

Engaging closely with Frank Ramsey's early twentieth century formalization of rational choice theory, Appiah convincingly argues that all attempts to render subjective probability and preference calculable rest on idealization: clearly, actual agents are not capable of these instan-

taneous, perfect logical calculations. In order to determine how the “content” of our beliefs—our actual preferences and probabilities—affects our actions, we must idealize away our actual cognitive capacities and constraints. But a single rational agent could never come to hold all of our inconsistent preferences and probabilities in the first place, so we must have some way of reconciling a necessary multiplicity of idealizations into the action of a single agent. In order to understand actual agents, we need a second step that, idealizing away from content, explains how the form of our beliefs—our deviations from “logical omniscience”—affects our actions.

Two successive theories, Appiah argues, are necessary to understand agency: one conditional upon the assumption that agents perfectly adhere to certain norms, and then one conditional upon the assumption that agents do not. But, Appiah implies, dual theories of normativity and error characterize more than just the market:

What we see here is the intimate connection between the description of a person or community as recognizing certain norms—a description that might be offered from the perspective of an outsider—and the understanding of those norms from the perspective of the member of the community from the point of view of the insider... To see this is to see that an agent is not simply a *thing* that conforms, more or less inadequately, to the constraints of rationality that decision theory represents, but also a *person* who recognizes, however imperfectly, those constraints as rationally binding.

It is not a coincidence that so many of the idealizations that populate *As If* “characterize the norms, conformity to which constitutes someone, for our community, as what we call ‘an agent’”: intentional minds, economic actors, sovereign nation-states, racialized and sexual persons. Idealizations are the cognitive prerequisites for our individual action on the world, but they also bear our communal definitions of who counts as an agent.

But, Appiah suggests, we identify and constitute agents not only by our idealizations—the norms to which our agents ought conform—but by the gap between idealization and reality, norms and conformance, map and territory. Appiah’s framework locates theoretical agency in error, imperfect rationality, and normative deviance.

TO ERR, IS, AFTER ALL, HUMAN, but Appiah’s account of the interplay between agency, normativity, and error opens fascinating views of economic theory that, unfortunately, he leaves largely unexplored.⁵ *As If* lacks an explicit articulation of the theoretical complement to Ramsey’s idealization of perfect rationality: Appiah argues that such a theory, which would idealize away the content of economic agents’ beliefs and preferences to explain the causal powers of their deviations from rationality, is necessary, but fails to himself supply it.

Historically, this theory was produced by Ramsey’s colleague and friend, John Maynard Keynes. Ramsey had originally formulated his theory of probability in response to Keynes’ *Treatise on Probability*, and Keynes’ magnum opus, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, in turn places at its textual and theoretical center a theory of how economic agents recognize but deviate from normative rationality. Of orthodox economics, Keynes writes:

At any given time facts and expectations were assumed to be given in a definite and calculable form; and risks, of which, tho admitted, not much notice was taken, were supposed to be capable of an exact actuarial computation. The calculus of probability, tho mention of it was kept in the background, was supposed to be capable of reducing uncertainty to the same calculable status as that of certainty itself.⁶

However, Keynes continues, the full assimilation of uncertainty to the structure of rational calculation is logically

impossible. By uncertainty, Keynes did not mean “risky” games of roulette, life expectancy, and (to some extent) the weather—phenomena that are not certain but merely probable. Uncertainty instead refers to “the prospect of a European war...or the price of copper and the rate of interest twenty years hence, or the obsolescence of a new invention, or the position of private wealth owners in the social system in 1970.” Major political upheavals, future conditions of exchange, changes in the means of production, and outcomes of the class struggle are all incalculable, hence unknowable, hence possible—and realizable in action, for it is precisely “human decisions *affecting the future*, whether personal or political or economic, [that] cannot depend on strict mathematical expectation, since the basis for making such calculations does not exist.”⁷

Nevertheless, “the necessity for action and for decision” in the market compels Keynesian economic actors to act “exactly as if we had behind us a good Benthamite calculation of a series of prospective advantages and disadvantages, each multiplied by its appropriate probability, waiting to be summed.” Instead, economic actors 1) largely ignore future uncertainty, assuming that the present is a better guide to the future than they know it to be; 2) assume that the present state of opinion, expressed in prices and output, correctly sums up future prospects; and so 3) fall back on the communal or conventional judgment of the market. Expectation under uncertainty is a social relation, explicitly mediated by the normative community Appiah posits as central to the construction of agency.

Moreover, in Keynes, it is the constitutive nature of error—the impossibility of perfect rationality—to economic agency that subtends the crisis potential of capitalism: “a practical theory of future based on these principles...is subject to sudden and violent changes. The practice of calmness and immobility, of certainty and security, suddenly breaks down.”⁸

As If instructs us that while we need idealized theories to understand and act upon the world, our theories and our communities define their agents where they leave open the possibility of non-ideality, the necessary deviation from normativity. For Keynes, this is in the figure of the investor, the actor who makes choices about the allocation of capital when adherence to rational calculability is impossible.⁹ For Marx, this is the proletariat, the subject of history and manifestation of agency.

The reason why we care about who gets to count as an economic agent isn’t that we have an abstract commitment to a visibility politics of the oppressed. What really matters is that economic theory has an exhortative function; the erring capitalists and workers of Keynes and Marx are not just theoretical agents, but the intended audience for the *General Theory* and *Capital’s* calls to political action. Marx, of course, ultimately addresses his writing to the proletariat. Keynes, meanwhile, directs the Concluding Notes to his *General Theory* to “practical men...civil servants and politicians and even agitators” who might enact his prescriptions of countercyclical deficit spending and stock market reforms (the “euthanasia of the rentier”).¹⁰

However, *As If* fails to address a reader. Appiah is “interested in the role of untruth in *thinking* about reality, not in the usefulness of *speaking* untruths.” The distinction he intends is one between cases where the idealizer knows that what they are thinking is false and cases in which they are deceived, the difference between the necessity of idealization and the expediency of deception. But all communication is not deceit: *As If* leaves open the urgent question of what we talk about—and whom we talk to—when we talk about ideals.

The norms that structure who counts as an agent are undeniably political—questions of personhood, disenfranchisement, and citizenship, in their broadest senses, which are expressed and negotiated in political discourse, institutional structures, material deprivation, and violent exclusion. As languages of agency, idealization and political discourse alike are languages of counterfactuals:

they express what is not, but might be. “It’s only because we can understand what it would be for the world to be different from the way it is,” Appiah writes, “only because we have epistemic access to possible worlds, if you like—that we can build idealizations.”

But politics is concerned not with false antecedents but their possible consequents. The untruths we tell about actuality matter less than the possibilities—and the actions necessary to achieve them—that they illuminate in our political futures. Debates in politics, unlike in political philosophy or academic economics, are not usually fought over alternate modeling assumptions. Conversely, the invocation of modeling assumptions in political discourse serves not as an opening of a conversation about economic theory, but as an implied commitment to political action.

Yet Appiah equivocates between these two senses of possibility, between what is a possible (but false) modeling assumption, and what is politically possible or attainable (but not yet realized) given our assumptions:

The questions are often complex, empirical, social scientific questions about human possibility: what changes ... is it feasible to bring about, given the way people are psychologically, given the social structures in which they are embedded? But in all these domains, in taking something false for true, we are engaging in what is, at least from one angle, our most astonishing human capacity: the ability to access ways the world is not but might have been.

The problem behind Appiah’s equivocation is not just linguistic—we only have one word for possibility—but logical: expanding the boundaries of what is possible in our model will determine what we see as possible in our political futures, while stating a political possibility will necessarily carry with it an implicit idealized model. Speaking one untruth precludes speaking the other.

observed the corrosive drift of language around him: “The Third Reich coined only a very small number of words in its language, perhaps—indeed probably—none at all. But it changes the values of words and the frequency of their occurrence...and in the process steepens words and groups of words and sentence structures with its poison.”¹¹ Commentators are self-righteously attentive to the perversions of language foisted on us by the Trump administration, as if truth were a buoy to cling to. But in doing so, we have swapped out the political agents of our language and our economic theories for jurors, leaving only the incredulous epistemic possibility of a fact-finder. Is it possible that the inauguration audience was the largest ever? Is it possible that the wall can be built in a year? Is it possible that Uber will provide living wages? Is it possible that tariffs will bring back manufacturing jobs?

But the point of articulating an untruth in politics is not whether we believe it, but about what its effect is when spoken—who the audience is, and what possibilities they are urged to enact. Unlike Keynes and Marx, whose theories ascribe theoretical agency to and demand political action from their audience, Trump’s untruths—to the extent that they can be constituted as a “theory”—address the working and middle classes, even as his policies are aimed to benefit the elite.

The language of political possibility is fragile, elusive in the best of times. It can sound wonkish, uncertain, or gullible. But at its most rhetorically powerful, programmatic usage slips into another modal category: necessity. We speak untruths to compel action, and to compel it now: saying another world is possible means we need another world. As an accidental cartography of the truth and untruth that occupy our political attention, *As If* can help us understand how to recover a language of urgency in the possibilities that are left to us. Any political possibility rests on a false representation of its subject, and Appiah is right to emphasize that shifting our normative

IDEALIZATION AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE ALIKE ARE LANGUAGES OF COUNTERFACTUALS: THEY EXPRESS WHAT IS NOT, BUT MIGHT BE.

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WHAT HAPPENS TO THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF POSSIBILITY in *As If* is happening today. Appiah notes that “our unhappy proliferation of ‘alternative facts’ is not what Vaihinger”—or Appiah—“had in mind” in their thinking about useful untruths and idealizations. Nevertheless, *As If*’s language for describing idealization characterizes the language of the current moment: a strong notion of brute truth, a focus on identifying and adjudicating untruths. Alternative facts, fake news, post-truth politics; the words of our vigilance are drenched in truth, and the limits and aims of our political language have shifted accordingly. Our preoccupation with truth, intended as a safeguard against Trump’s linguistic rot, has led inadvertently to a different sort of decay: the hollowing out of a political language of possibility, and of the awareness of the rhetorical functions of idealization.

The pure possibility that has long characterized political rhetoric, both mainstream and radical—Yes We Can, A Future to Believe In, Another World is Possible—now sounds tone deaf. This is not about optimism. It is undeniable that material realities in the current political moment have reduced what appears as immediately possible; what’s happening to political language reflects (and does not cause) what’s happening to politics, and to the most marginalized.

But something nonetheless changes in the political language of possibility when politics becomes about hard truths and untruths. In the *Language of the Third Reich*, the Jewish-turned-Protestant philologist Victor Klemperer

constructions of agents in a community is what shifts the boundaries of the possible. We see this in movements for immigrants’ rights: the contestation of citizenship and community, “no borders, no walls” as possibility and as demand. We see it, too, in courtroom and workplace battles over what counts as work and who counts as a worker in an economy increasingly defined by subcontracting, the “gig economy,” and other structures both hostile to labor organizing and outside many worker protection laws.

The limits of *As If* are the limits of idealization. They are the limits of a political discourse in which truth evacuates possibility. Appiah asks of idealizations, “For what purposes...?” We might ask this ourselves. For what purposes have we made a map of the territory if we don’t know where we can go?

1 Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (Macmillan, 1893), 169.

2 Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation", in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 166-184.

3 Joan Robinson, a British post-Keynesian who attempted to assimilate aspects of Marx's work into a Keynesian framework (*An Essay in Marxian Economics*, 1942), is often quoted: "A model which took account of all the variegation of reality would be of no more use than a map at the scale of one to one." *Essays in the Theory of Economic Growth*, London: Macmillan (1962), 33.

4 Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah—Pt. III," Interview by Daniel Kodosi, *Oxford Review of Books*, the-orb.org/2017/09/22/interview-with-kwame-anthony-appiah-pt-iii.

5 And, for that matter, sociopolitical structures. What, for instance, might this methodology tell us about Western constructions of gender and sexuality, if agency is coextensive with not just the acceptance of norms as binding but also with the inevitability of noncompliance? If a theory of law-breaking is constitutive of legal agents, what does this say about international law without enforcement mechanisms, or about the relationship between the racialized carceral subject and the citizen? Appiah briefly considers sexual orientation and race as idealizations in *As If* (and at length in his *Ethics of Identity*), but does not explore the connection with his account of agency and normativity as explicitly as might be hoped. Appiah writes, "Simply believing there really are or really aren't any homosexuals is not yet to have a moral belief." What we are to do with this perspective—what expressing, individually or collectively, that there are, strictly speaking, no races or sexual orientations makes politically possible—is left (at least in *As If*) underdetermined.

6 John Maynard Keynes, "The General Theory of Employment." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 51, no. 2 (Feb. 1937): 213.

7 Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* London: MacMillan & Co, Ltd., 1957, 162.

8 Keynes, "The General Theory of Employment." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 51, no. 2 (Feb. 1937): 215.

9 The worker is not afforded the same status: remarking upon the "actual behaviour of labour" in striking upon decreases in nominal wages but not in the cost of living (i.e. the distribution and not the level of real wages), Keynes writes, "It is fortunate that the workers, though unconsciously, are instinctively more reasonable economists than the classical school." Workers' strikes are taken not to be intentional economic action as such ("unconsciously, instinctively") but as something of an empirical quirk.

10 The latter is explicitly intended to minimize the distortions in prices as expression of the collective judgment of agents in a state of uncertainty; that is, to bring the state of long-term expectations closer to the idealization of rational choice.

11 Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich* (Continuum, 2006), 14.

**THE LAST EARTH:
A PALESTINIAN STORY**

BY RAMZY BAROUD

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REMEMBERING THE NAKBA:

**THE POLITICS OF
PALESTINIAN HISTORY**

**JONATHAN
ADLER**

*The Earth is squeezing us.
I wish we were its wheat
So we could die and live again.*¹

OVER THE PAST TWO AND A HALF MONTHS, a narrow sliver of land in the eastern Mediterranean has transformed into a site of commemoration, resistance, and violence. Since March 30, Gazans have marched to the eastern edge of their territory—to an area no greater than eight-hundred meters in width, extending along the twenty-five-mile length of the Gaza Strip—to join the largest mass demonstration in Gaza since the late 1980s. Over ten thousand have participated in each of the weekly Friday protests; on May 14th, at the height of demonstrations, there were nearly forty-thousand Gazans in attendance. The protests coincide with the seventieth-anniversary of the Palestinian *nakba*, the expulsion of over seven-hundred thousand Palestinians from their land and homes in 1948. The rallies are an expression of defiance against what Palestinians call *al-nakba al-mustamerra*—the ongoing catastrophe—particularly in Gaza, where multiple wars, a crippling siege, failing infrastructure, and political infighting have pushed nearly two million Palestinians closer and closer to the brink of societal collapse. And these past two months have themselves marked yet another chapter in the history of Palestinian catastrophe. Israeli soldiers have killed over one hundred twenty Palestinian civilians and wounded over thirteen thousand with live sniper ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas canisters.² The majority of those lucky enough to survive the impact of bullets will, according to the local health ministry, be left with lifelong disabilities.³

What has been nearly as troubling, though, is the extent to which these basic facts have been distorted to justify the use of deadly force. The Israeli government has claimed that the Islamist fundamentalist organization, Hamas, is behind the protests, using demonstrators as human shields and attempting to breach the Israeli fence.⁴ Israeli officials have similarly maintained that their soldiers are acting in self-defense—or, conversely, that the Palestinians who throw stones and makeshift explosive devices, burn

tires and kites, and storm the fence constitute a threat to Israeli security. These activities, according to the Israeli government, are acts of war and free the military from the restrictions of human rights law.⁵

On further inspection, these justifications fall flat. While Hamas has indeed provided financial and organizational support to the demonstrators, the Great Return March has been led by a wide coalition of Palestinians from the beginning, including doctors, lawyers, university students and academics, civil society organizations, refugees, and families. Although Hamas has profited politically from the demonstrations, the movement has never “belonged” to them. To suggest otherwise, according to Asad Abu Sharekh, the spokesman for the march, “is Israel’s way to sabotage the idea of the march in order to justify its escalation against protesters.”⁶

Neither have protestors posed any significant danger to Israeli soldiers or civilians. Here, again, the evidence against the Israeli government is overwhelming: not a single Israeli has been physically harmed over the past two months.⁷ And at the very least, if Israeli soldiers are acting in self-defense, then they should theoretically injure or kill only those who constitute, by the state’s definition, a violent threat. This is especially true in Gaza, where the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) claims to have acted with super-human precision: its snipers, according to the army’s Twitter account, “know where every bullet landed.”⁸ Yet live fire has struck medical teams and ambulances.⁹ Snipers have shot elderly women and children.¹⁰ It is hard to see how any of these participants threatened the integrity of the Israeli state. The fact that the IDF maintains, despite much criticism, that they were confirmed threats is all the more troubling.

It is not only Israel, though, that has portrayed Palestinian protestors as a legitimate threat. The US government has justified the use of lethal force against demonstrators based on Israel’s right to “self-defense,” the same excuse used to justify Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria. The *New York Times*, too, has repeatedly misrepresented the protests, which it described as “armed clashes along the border.”¹¹ In the same sentence, the *Times* referred to both Palestinian protestors and the Iranian government as “threats” to Israel, collapsing the distinction between stones and nuclear weapons.¹²

There may be a number of reasons why this narrative—that Gazans are violent and thus responsible for their own deaths—continues to carry weight. The influence of the Israel lobby on American politics and media coverage may certainly be one of them. But one of the simplest explanations might also be one of the best: the Israeli government has not only twisted the facts, but has helped to prevent the truth from leaking out. Journalists on the frontlines in Gaza—those who are positioned to provide the best coverage of the protests—have been specifically targeted by the IDF. Though they were wearing helmets and bulletproof jackets, marked with “PRESS” in bold letters, at least twenty-two Palestinian reporters were struck by live sniper ammunition between March 30th and May 21st. Two have died from their wounds.¹³ According to the Forum of Palestinian Journalists, the total number of journalists injured at the protests has passed 175.¹⁴ The Israeli parliament has been considering legislation that would ban journalists from photographing on-duty IDF soldiers, where violations would be punishable with up to ten years in prison.¹⁵ The less the outside world knows about the protests in Gaza, the Israeli government seems to believe, the better.

IT IS REGRETTABLY FITTING THAT on the anniversary of the Palestinian *nakba*, the narrative of the protests in Gaza is distorted and silenced. Over the past seventy years, history itself—its use, abuse, and erasure—has played an important role in helping to prolong the *nakba*. Indeed, part of the original catastrophe was the destruction and scattering of vast amounts of Palestinian history. As the historian Rashid Khalidi points out, between 1947 and

1949, “more than half of the Arab population of Palestine fled or were driven from their homes...while the two cities in Palestine with the largest Arab populations, Jaffa and Haifa, were ethnically cleansed of most Arabs.”¹⁶ This forced removal meant that the majority of privately-held historical documents were lost or destroyed in the years following the *nakba*. As a result, there is a dire shortage of printed material to document the history of pre-1948 Palestine. Even with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, any central archive would necessarily be a fragmentary collection.

Not all of the documents in question are exactly lost, however. Much of the historical material from private Palestinian collections that survived 1948 was collected and kept classified in the Israeli State Archives. Until the 1980s—when the public was granted access to this material, inaugurating a new era of Israeli revisionist history—there could be no challenge to the Israeli nationalist myths that pervaded the historiography and misrepresented both the *nakba* and the subsequent years of military rule. Even today, the *nakba* is largely absent from public discourse in Israel, and the state maintains the authority to punish those who commemorate it.¹⁷

The impact of these restrictions, though, is not limited to historians. As the Palestinian-American journalist Ramzy Baroud argues, part of the trauma of the ongoing *nakba* for Palestinians is the continued suppression of their own history. In a recent op-ed for *The Independent*, Baroud recalls a particularly vivid memory from his early life in a Gaza refugee camp. During the First Intifada, Israeli soldiers entered the camp and killed four youth, including one of Baroud’s close childhood friends. But what struck him most severely was the silence in the wake of these deaths. “Once the young men were buried,” Baroud remembers, “my father fiddled hopelessly with the radio, trying to find any news broadcast, anywhere, that reported

in the way of historical analysis or explicit argumentation. Rather, it is the logical extension of Baroud’s work as a journalist. His goal is to allow Palestinians to speak for themselves, to narrate their own histories, and in so doing, to show “ordinary people as active agents in shaping the present and future.”¹⁹ *The Last Earth*, then, is a testament to the importance of oral tradition: although physical records have been lost, Palestinian history will endure as long as there are those to remember and retell it.

Along with a team of fellow researchers and journalists, Baroud spent the past three years reaching out to Palestinians across the world through social media and other online platforms, sorting through hundreds of potential candidates, and interviewing a final fifty to gather the stories presented in this book. The final product reflects this diversity of time and place: in nine chapters, we move between Gaza and Australia, Jenin and Syria, al-Mujaydil and Lebanon; from the Great Revolt of 1936 to Black September in 1970, from the *nakba* of 1948 to the Second Intifada in 2002, and from the *naksa* of 1967 to the Syrian war in 2015.

It might seem that such a wide scope would belie Baroud’s larger aim in *The Last Earth*—to provide “a unified perspective on Palestinian identity in modern times.” Yet Baroud manages to weave these seemingly disparate stories into a distinct narrative. Despite everything that serves to divide Palestinians from each other—walls, fences, borders, political factionalism and military force, exile and diaspora—Baroud shows that their individual histories are linked by a common root and a multitude of shared experiences. All of the Palestinians in *The Last Earth* carry the *nakba* of 1948 with them, through memories of lost villages, the stories of parents and grandparents, or even a family memento—a key, for example, to a house that has long been destroyed. But this is not merely an historical awareness: they all remain affected by that original

AS LONG AS THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT DISTORTS THE NARRATIVE OF THE PROTESTS, SILENCES PALESTINIAN JOURNALISTS, AND FORBIDS PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF PALESTINIAN HISTORY, SIMPLY GIVING PALESTINIANS A PLATFORM TO RETELL THEIR OWN HISTORIES IS A NECESSARILY POLITICAL ACT.

on the terrible events that took place in our camp on that day. No one did.”¹⁸ This was the same silence that accompanied the destruction of his grandfather’s village, Beit Daras, in 1948. And, Baroud soon realized, this was a silence familiar to Palestinians everywhere, whose stories had been ignored or twisted, and ultimately expunged from the historical record.

Baroud, the editor of the *Palestine Chronicle*, a former managing editor at the *Middle East Eye* and *Al Jazeera Online*, and a frequent contributor to a host of English-language publications, describes his work as an author and a journalist as giving voice to those Palestinians who have been “deliberately muted.” His fourth and latest book—*The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story*—is a worthy addition to this project. *The Last Earth* is, as Baroud calls it, a “people’s history,” an account of the *nakba* and its aftermath told from the perspective of those who experienced it. This is not a conventional work of history: there is little

catastrophe. Even for those in the diaspora, as illustrated by the stories in *The Last Earth*, the mere fact of being Palestinian can be a burden. It is the Palestinian schoolchild who, when invited to share the story of her family’s emigration to Australia, is informed by her teacher that “there [is] no such thing as Palestine.” It is the Palestinian refugee in Syria who, while fleeing his country for Turkey, learns to deny his identity because Palestinians are “thrown in Turkish jails for significantly longer durations than their Syrian counterparts.” It is the granddaughter of a Palestinian who carries with her a “nagging sadness”—a guilt for being able to “forget [her] people’s suffering.”

For those living in Gaza and the West Bank, however, the ongoing *nakba* manifests itself on a daily basis. Here, to be Palestinian is to be persecuted not only by Israel and its Western allies, but even by the Palestinian Authority, whose security forces serve as “a line of defense for the Israeli army,” enter the homes of Palestinians, and “[demand]

confessions and [levy] threats.” To be Palestinian is to live under military occupation—particularly for those who have known nothing else. The younger Palestinians in *The Last Earth* grow up under the constant watch of the Israeli military establishment, and their attitudes towards Israel are shaped by their interactions with soldiers. Hana Shalabi, the infamous Palestinian hunger striker, would often “hear of ‘the Jews’ [as a young girl] but would hardly ever see them.” Her decision to support the First Intifada, then, is not a result of a deep-seated hatred of Jews, but rather a reaction to the murder of a neighbor by Israeli soldiers, “ugly, cruel men who spoke a strange language and wore military uniforms.”

To be Palestinian, as exemplified by Shalabi, is also to be part of a long tradition of resistance. Baroud, however, steers clear of glorifying his subjects: the Palestinians in *The Last Earth* resist desperately, driven by the need to regain a sense of agency. Baroud captures the humiliation and despair that push those living under military occupation, particularly young men, towards violence. But he does so without endorsing it—if anything, he emphasizes its consequences. It is Shalabi’s brother, Samir, who decides to place a bomb in the middle of a street to ambush an Israeli military convoy, and who is later killed by Israeli soldiers while attempting to carry out a suicide attack. But it is Shalabi who bears the punishment for her brother’s actions: suspected of planning to avenge Samir’s death, she is kept in administrative detention for twenty-five months, and subjected to physical violence, sexual abuse, and psychological torture. When she is arrested for the second time, just months after being released, and assaulted with even greater brutality, she begins her hunger strike:

[A]s Hana grew physically weaker, her resolve grew stronger. Her gums swelled by day twenty. Her hair fell out by day thirty-five. And only when blood began to pour from her nose was she taken to a Haifa hospital... [it was] a sign that her death was imminent.

Shalabi’s story is certainly a testament to the human capacity for nonviolent resistance. But it also suggests that under certain conditions of oppression, a desire for justice can override our most basic instincts for survival. Here, there is no difference between life and death—they are, as a protestor in Gaza recently affirmed, the “same thing.”²⁰

AS LONG AS THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT distorts the narrative of the protests, silences Palestinian journalists, and forbids public discussion of Palestinian history, simply giving Palestinians a platform to retell their own histories is a necessarily political act. It is to demonstrate, as Baroud has recently argued, that Palestinians are capable of “making decisions independent from Palestinian factions.”²¹ The fact, too, that Baroud relies on oral tradition is welcome: even Israel’s most important revisionist historians have largely restricted themselves to Israeli sources, ignoring the potential of oral testimony. But Baroud’s deeper contribution is to show that despite the lack of recorded Palestinian history—or, perhaps, because of its absence—Palestinians are committed to documenting it themselves.

In *The Last Earth*, we learn of Salim, a young Palestinian living in Gaza during the Suez War, who is compelled to follow the Israeli Army in “their every move” and write “in his journal everything he saw and heard.” Salim understands the importance of physical documentation: it does not matter whether he can make sense of the events he witnesses on his own, so long as he can set everything down in ink. There is also Kamal, a Palestinian youth detained in an Israeli military prison during the First Intifada. Because he recognizes the fragility of his own story, Kamal carves the names of his family members into the cell walls, setting in stone “all that was certain [to him].” And there is Ali, a father in search of his daughter, lost amidst the chaos of the ongoing war in Syria. With Baroud’s help, Ali tries to reach his daughter through the Red Cross, writing a series of letters that will most likely never reach their intended recipient. If he dies before he reaches her, Ali instructs

his daughter, she should pass on his story to her siblings and children—the story of a Palestinian Bedouin, “born in a world that had no place for poor people or wanderers.”

Ali’s story illustrates the larger point that in *The Last Earth*, Palestinian history is confined to family history. The younger generations learn the history of the *nakba* through the stories of their parents and grandparents. Baroud succeeds not merely by capturing these in print, but by elevating family history as a genre of historical narrative. These stories often convey Palestinian history as well as, if not better than, the traditional academic accounts. A number of historians, for example, have written extensively about the phenomenon of Palestinian land loss during the 1930s and the subsequent urbanization of the Palestinian peasantry. But to hear the stories of these *fellahin* (tillers, farmers) from their sons and daughters—to learn of their struggle to “fend off the constant attempts of the large clans to deprive [them] of [their] land and strip [them] of what was rightfully [theirs]”—is to grasp this history as a lived experience. So too might we read scholarly accounts of Jamal Abdel Nasser’s rise to power in Egypt and appreciate its importance in the context of Palestinian liberation struggle. But it is more meaningful, and perhaps more memorable, to meet those Palestinian refugees who placed such hopes in this Egyptian leader that they named their sons Jamal in his honor.

These family histories also help us understand the *nakba* as a constantly unfolding catastrophe: *The Last Earth* is a tragedy in multiple acts, seen through the eyes of three generations of Palestinians. This is, too, where Baroud makes his largest historiographical contribution. Although he is not the first to record Palestinian stories, most historians and anthropologists have either focused exclusively on gathering oral histories from the pre-1948 period or have restricted themselves to a specific historical event or topic in the post-1948 era.²² In *The Last Earth*, however, by zooming in on a single family unit, it becomes clear how *al-nakba al-mustamera* extends across time—not, as we might assume, in a linear fashion. To take the Lubani family as an example: in the first generation, there is Mohammed, a “well-regarded government employee” from a small Palestinian village. In 1948, when his village is destroyed, he escapes with family to a refugee camp near Damascus, where he is reduced to shoveling cow dung for a living. Despite the upheaval of his childhood, Mohammed’s son, Jamal, manages to gain a respected position as a teacher in an UNRWA school. Yet they are still Palestinian refugees, living in a country where their security and stability is necessarily tenuous. So when their camp is besieged by Syrian government forces, Jamal’s son is forced to flee his home, following in his grandfather’s footsteps. These “echoes of history,” as Baroud puts it, affirm the reality of *nakba* for Palestinians today, who may be affected by it as directly and as terribly as their grandparents. They suggest that the adversity Palestinians have faced and continue to face is, in fact, linked to that first catastrophe. These historical links, in turn, help us understand the ways in which the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of 1948 is simultaneously a protest against current injustice.

IT MIGHT SEEM ODD, given Baroud’s focus on the *nakba* and Palestinian identity, that *The Last Earth* begins outside Palestine—in a refugee camp in Syria, present day, with the story of a third-generation Palestinian. Though he identifies as Palestinian, Khaled is born in Yarmouk and has known nothing else. For him, Palestine only exists “in books, or as the tattered map in his family’s living room, and in old fables conveyed by long-dead grandparents.” Amidst the violence of the Syrian crisis, Khaled escapes from Yarmouk. But unlike his grandfather’s expulsion, nearly seventy years before, Khaled’s exile is not an exclusively Palestinian catastrophe. As he makes his way towards western Europe, Khaled is accompanied by refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, all of whom are fleeing war and desolation, and who carry on with a dogged persistence despite the many obstacles. Perhaps, then, Baroud wants us to see the Palestinian

story as a universal one—a story shared by the millions of refugees and exiles that wander the earth. If we are moved by these stories of hardship, Baroud seems to suggest, then Palestinians cannot be excluded from our sympathy. And if we agree that all people deserve a permanent home—a “last earth”—then we cannot fail to extend this right to Palestinians.

But if *The Last Earth* begins by universalizing the Palestinian struggle, then the end reminds us that the *nakba* occupies a distinct place in the human narrative of exile and loss. “The Last Sky”, the eighth chapter of the book, is the story of Leila, also a third-generation Palestinian. Yet Leila’s family has seemingly managed to escape the legacy of 1948. Born in Saudi Arabia, she spends her childhood in Jordan, where her Western-educated parents operate a successful business. Palestine is peripheral to her existence: “there did not seem to be a need to mention their refugee status, or include Palestine into everyday discussions...the Nakba was rarely invoked at the dinner table or at family gatherings.”

When the Syrian crisis erupts in 2015, Leila is moved by the images of refugees crowding into small boats, desperately seeking an escape from their war-ravaged homes. Armed with a medical degree and a doctorate in psychology, she travels to an island in the Mediterranean to volunteer at a refugee center, assigned to help “dejected refugees negotiate their pain and cope with their traumas.” But when she arrives, she is informed that there are no Syrians present. Here, there are only Palestinian refugees: men, women, and children who have fled camps in Syria, Gaza, and Lebanon, and are now stranded in the middle of the sea. Though Leila was motivated by a basic human desire—an urge to help end suffering—her journey brought her back to Palestine. On average, she remembers, refugees live in exile for seventeen years; yet for these Palestinians, “exile did not have a time limit.” If, Leila

IF THE LAST EARTH BEGINS BY UNIVERSALIZING THE PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE, THEN THE END REMINDS US THAT THE NAKBA OCCUPIES A DISTINCT PLACE IN THE HUMAN NARRATIVE OF EXILE AND LOSS.

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wonders, we hope that Syrians might someday return to Syria, then for these refugees, “why not to Palestine? Why never Palestine?”

Leila’s story reminds us that the deeper we are willing to look, the more we realize that our contemporary crises are inextricably connected to the *nakba*, in both its past and present forms. We should care about Palestine because we believe that all people are deserving of certain universal rights: the right to return to one’s homeland, to be equal under the law, to be secure on one’s own property, to protest without risking death. But we cannot ignore the fact that the *nakba* is exceptional in its scope—that this seventy-year saga is, in its historical specificity, particularly tragic. As the late Edward Said argued nearly twenty years ago, any permanent resolution to the *nakba* cannot require Palestinians to “forget and renounce [their] history of loss, dispossessed by the very people who taught everyone the importance of not forgetting the past.”²³ The stories collected in *The Last Earth* serve as evidence of this history of loss and resistance, a history that continues to unfold today. But they also stand as a testament to the power of history itself, of the need to recount the past, as part of that struggle. They remind us that yes, this *nakba* must end; but so too must it be remembered.

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