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Tom Engelhardt

# The rise and fall of the cockroach superpower

*The American Century ends early:*

*How the USS Enterprise was transformed into the USS Roach*

**L**ike Gregor Samsa, the never-to-be-forgotten character in Franz Kafka's story *The Metamorphosis*, we awoke on January 7th to discover that we, too, were "a giant insect" with "a domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments" and numerous "pitifully thin" legs that "waved helplessly" before our eyes. If you prefer, though, you can just say it: we opened our eyes and found that, somehow, we had become a giant roach of a country.

Yes, I know, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are now in charge and waving their own little limbs wildly, trying to do some of what needs to be done for this sad land of the disturbed, over-armed, sick, and dying. But anyone who watched the scenes of Floridians celebrating a Super Bowl victory, largely unmasked and cheering, shoulder to shoulder in the streets of Tampa, can't help but realise that we are now indeed a roach nation, the still-wealthiest, most pandemically unmasked one on Planet Earth.

But don't just blame Donald Trump. Admittedly, we've just

passed through the Senate trial and acquittal of the largest political cockroach around. I'm talking about the president who, upon discovering that his vice president was in danger of being "executed" ("Hang Mike Pence!") and was being rushed out of the Senate as a mob bore down on him, promptly tweeted: "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution".

Just imagine. The veep who had – if you don't mind my mixing my creature metaphors here – toadied up to the president for four endless years was then given a functional death sentence by that same man. You can't fall much deeper into personal roachdom than that. My point here, though, is that our all-American version of roacherie was a long time in coming.

Or put another way: unimaginable as The Donald might have seemed when he descended that Trump Tower escalator in June 2015 to hail his future "great, great wall," denounce Mexican "rapists," and bid to make a whole country into his apprentices, he didn't end up in the Oval Office for no reason.

He was the symptom, not the disease, though what a symptom he would prove to be – and when it came to diseases, what a nightmare beyond all imagining.

Let's face it, whether we fully grasp the fact or not, we now live in a system, as well as a country, that's visibly in an early stage of disintegration. And there lies a remarkable tale of history happening at warp speed, of how, in not quite three decades, the USS Enterprise of imperial powers was transformed into the USS Roach.

## ***Once upon a time on Earth...***

Return for a moment to 1991, almost two years after the Berlin Wall fell, when the Soviet Union finally imploded and the Cold War officially ended. Imagine that you had been able to show Americans then – especially the political class in Washington – that 13-minute video of Trump statements and tweets interlarded with mob actions in the Capitol that the Democratic House impeachment managers used in their opening salvo against the former president. Americans –





just about any of us – would have thought we were watching the most absurd science fiction or perhaps the single least reality-based bit of black comedy imaginable.

In the thoroughly self-satisfied (if somewhat surprised) Washington of 1991, the triumphalist capital of “the last superpower”, that video would have portrayed a president, an insurrectionary mob, and an endangered Congress no one could have imagined possible – not in another nearly 30 years, not in a century, not in any American future. Then again, if in 1991 you had tried to convince anyone in this country that a walking Ponzi scheme(r) like Donald Trump could become president, no less be impeached twice, you

would have been laughed out of the room.

After all, this country had just become the ultimate superpower in history, the last one ever. Left alone on this planet, it had a military beyond compare and an economy that was the heartland of a globalised system and the envy of the world. The Earth was – or at least to the political class of that moment seemed to be – ours for the taking, but certainly not for the losing, not in any imaginable future. The question then wasn't keeping them out but keeping us in. No “big, fat, beautiful walls” were needed. After all, Russia was a wreck. China was still emerging economically from the hell of the Maoist years. Europe was dependent on the US and, when it came to the rest of world, what else need be said?

This was an American planet, pure and simple.

In retrospect, consider the irony.

There had been talk then about a post-Cold War “peace dividend”. Who would have guessed, though, that dividends of any sort would increasingly go to the top 1 percent and that almost 30 years later this country would functionally be a plutocracy overseen until a month ago by a self-professed multibillionaire? Who would have imagined that the American version of a peace dividend would have been siphoned off by more billionaires than anyplace else on earth and that, in those same years, inequality would reach historic heights, while poverty and hunger only grew? Who woulda guessed that whatever peace dividend didn't go to the ultra-wealthy would go to an ever-larger national security state and the industrial complex of weapons makers that surrounded it? Who woulda guessed that, in official post-Cold War Washington, peace would turn out to be the last thing on anyone's mind,

---

even though this country seemed almost disarmingly enemy-less? (Remember when the worst imaginable combination of enemies, a dreaded “axis of evil”, would prove to be Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, all embattled, distinctly tertiary powers?)

Who woulda guessed that a military considered beyond compare (and funded to this day like no other) would proceed to fight war after war, literally decades of conflict, and yet – except for the quasi-triumph of the first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq – achieve victory in none of them? Staggering trillions of taxpayer dollars would be spent on them, while those billionaires were given untold tax breaks. Honestly, who would have guessed then that, on a planet lacking significant enemies, Washington, even six presidents later, would prove incapable of stopping fighting?

Who woulda guessed that, in September 2001, not Russia or Communist China, but a tiny group of Islamic militants led by a rich Saudi extremist the US had once backed would send 19 (mostly Saudi) hijackers to directly attack the United States? They would, of course, cause death and mayhem, allowing President George W. Bush to launch an almost 20-year “global war on terror”, which still shows no sign of ending. Who woulda guessed that, in the wake of those 9/11 terror attacks, the son of the man who had presided over the first Gulf War (but stopped short of felling Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein) and the top officials of his administration would come to believe that the world was his oyster and that the US should dominate the Greater Middle East and possi-

## ***It should have been obvious that something was awry on the yellow brick road to imperial glory***

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bly the planet in a way previously unimaginable? Who would have imagined that he would invade Iraq (having done the same in Afghanistan a year and a half earlier), effectively helping to spread Islamic extremism far and wide, while creating a never-ending disaster for this country?

Who woulda guessed that, in 2009, in the wake of a Great Recession at home, the next president, Barack Obama, would order a massive “surge” of forces into Afghanistan, a war already eight years old? Tens of thousands of new troops, not to speak of contractors, CIA operatives, and others would be sent there without faintly settling things.

By November 2016, when an antiquated electoral system gave the popular vote to Hillary Clinton but put Donald Trump, a man who promised to end this country’s “endless wars” (he didn’t) in the Oval Office, it should have been obvious that something was awry on the yellow brick road to imperial glory. By then, in fact, for a surprising number of Americans, this had become a land of grotesque inequality and lack of opportunity. And many of them would prove ready indeed to use their votes to send a message to the country about their desire to

Trump that very reality.

From there, of course, with no Wizard of Oz in sight, it would be anything but a yellow brick road to January 6, 2021, when, the president having rejected the results of the 2020 election, a mob would storm the Capitol. All of it and the impeachment fiasco to follow would reveal the functional definition of a failing democracy, one in which the old rules no longer held.

## ***Exiting the Superpower Stage of History***

And, of course, I have yet to even mention the obvious – the still-unending nightmare that engulfed the country early in 2020 and that, I suspect, will someday be seen as the true ending point for a strikingly foreshortened American century. I’m thinking, of course, of Covid-19, the pandemic disease that swept the country, infecting tens of millions of Americans and killing hundreds of thousands in a fashion unmatched anywhere else on the planet. It would even for a time fell a president, while creating mayhem and ever more fierce division in unmasked parts of the country filled with civilians armed to the teeth, swept up in conspiracy theories, and at the edge of who knew what.

Call it a sign from the gods or anything you want, but call it startling. Imagine a disease that the last superpower handled so much more poorly than countries with remarkably fewer resources. Think of it as a kind of judgment, if not epitaph, on that very superpower.

Or put another way: not quite 30 years after the Soviet Union

exited the stage of history, we're living in a land that was itself strangely intent on heading for that same exit – a crippled country led by a 78-year-old president, its system under startling pressure and evidently beginning to come apart at the seams. One of its political parties is unrecognisable; its presidency has been stripped of a fully functioning Congress and is increasingly imperial in nature; its economic system plutocratic; its military still struggling across significant parts of the planet, while a possible new cold war with a rising China is evidently on the horizon; and all of this on a planet that itself, even putting aside that global pandemic, is visibly in the deepest of trouble.

At the end of Franz Kafka's classic tale, Gregor Samsa, now a giant insect with a rotting apple embedded in its back, dies in roach hell, even if also in his very own room with his parents and sisters

## *Is the fate of Franz Kafka's cockroach character in store, after a fashion, for the American superpower?*

nearby. Is the same fate in store, after a fashion, for the American superpower?

In some sense, in the Trump and Covid-19 years, the United States has indeed been unmasked as a roach superpower on a planet going to – again, excuse the mixed animal metaphors – the dogs. The expected all-American age of power and glory hasn't been faintly what was imagined in 1991, not in a country that has shown remarkably few signs of coming to grips with what these

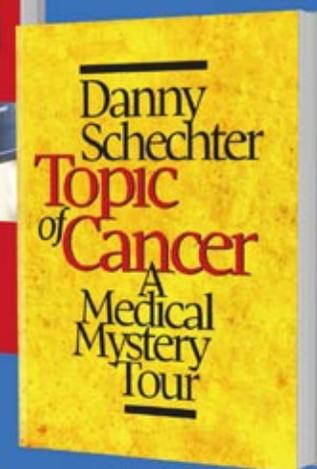
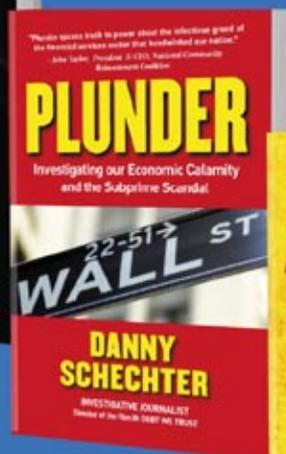
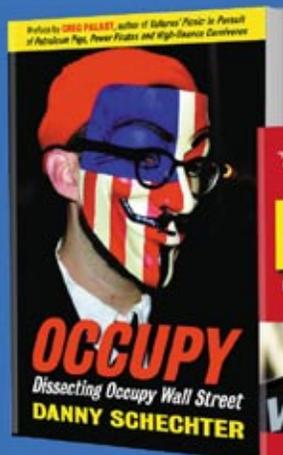
years have truly meant.

Centuries after the modern imperial age began, it's evidently coming to an end in a hell that Joe Biden and crew won't be able to stop, even if, unlike the previous president, they're anything but intent on thoroughly despoiling this land. Still, Trump or Biden, at this point it couldn't be clearer that we need some new way of thinking about and being on this increasingly roach-infested planet of ours. **CT**

*Tom Engelhardt runs the website [www.TomDispatch.com](http://www.TomDispatch.com) This essay was first published He is a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of a highly praised history of American triumphalism in the Cold War, *The End of Victory Culture*. A fellow of the Type Media Center, his sixth and latest book is *A Nation Unmade by War**

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*John Whitehead & Nisha Whitehead*

# Welcome to the world of techno-censorship

*We're on a slippery slope that begins with the censoring of 'disinformation' and ends with the silencing of truth*

*"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."*

– George Orwell

**T**his is the slippery slope that leads to the end of free speech as we once knew it.

In a world increasingly automated and filtered through the lens of artificial intelligence, we are finding ourselves at the mercy of inflexible algorithms that dictate the boundaries of our liberties.

Once artificial intelligence becomes a fully integrated part of the government bureaucracy, there will be little recourse: we will be subject to the intransigent judgments of techno-rulers.

This is how it starts.

Martin Niemöller's warning about the widening net that ensnares us all still applies.

"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a

Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me."

In our case, however, it started with the censors who went after extremists spouting so-called "hate speech," and few spoke out – because they were not extremists and didn't want to be shamed for being perceived as politically incorrect.

Then the internet censors got involved and went after extremists spouting "disinformation" about stolen elections, the Holocaust, and Hunter Biden, and few spoke out – because they were not extremists and didn't want to be shunned for appearing to disagree with the majority.

By the time the techno-censors went after extremists spouting "misinformation" about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines, the censors had developed a system and strategy for silencing the non-conformists. Still, few spoke out.

Eventually, "we the people" will be the ones in the crosshairs. At some point or another, depending on how the government and its corporate allies define what constitutes "extremism, we might all be considered guilty of some thought

crime or other. When that time comes, there may be no one left to speak out or speak up in our defence.

Whatever we tolerate now – whatever we turn a blind eye to – whatever we rationalise when it is inflicted on others, whether in the name of securing racial justice or defending democracy or combating fascism, will eventually come back to imprison us, one and all.

Watch and learn.

**W**e should all be alarmed when prominent social media voices such as Donald Trump, Alex Jones, David Icke and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. are censored, silenced and made to disappear from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram for voicing ideas that are deemed politically incorrect, hateful, dangerous or conspiratorial.

The question is not whether the content of their speech was legitimate. The concern is what happens after such prominent targets are muzzled. What happens once the corporate techno-censors turn their sights on the rest of us?

It's a slippery slope from cen-



protected or regulated?

When given a choice, the government always goes for the option that expands its powers at the expense of the citizenry's. Moreover, when it comes to free speech activities, regulation is just another word for censorship.

Right now, it's trendy and politically expedient to denounce, silence, shout down and shame anyone whose views challenge the prevailing norms, so the tech giants are lining up to appease their shareholders.

This is the tyranny of the majority against the minority – exactly the menace to free speech that James Madison sought to prevent when he drafted the First Amendment to the Constitution – marching in lockstep with technofascism.

With intolerance as the new scarlet letter of our day, we now find ourselves ruled by the mob. Those who dare to voice an opinion or use a taboo word or image that runs counter to the accepted norms are first in line to be shamed, shouted down, silenced, censored, fired, cast out and generally relegated to the dust heap of ignorant, mean-spirited bullies who are guilty of various “word crimes” and banished from society.

For example, a professor at Duquesne University was fired for using the N-word in an academic context. To get his job back, Gary Shank will have to go through diversity training and restructure his lesson plans. This is what passes for academic freedom in America today.

If Americans don't vociferously defend the right of a minority of one to subscribe to, let alone voice, ideas and opinions that may be offensive, hateful, intolerant or

## Orwell intended 1984 as a warning. Instead, it is being used as a dystopian instruction manual

merely different, then we're going to soon find that we have no rights whatsoever (to speak, assemble, agree, disagree, protest, opt in, opt out, or forge our own paths as individuals).

No matter what our numbers might be, no matter what our views might be, no matter what party we might belong to, it will not be long before “we the people” constitute a powerless minority in the eyes of a power-fuelled fascist state driven to maintain its power at all costs.

We are almost at that point. The steady, pervasive censorship creep that is being inflicted on us by corporate tech giants with the blessing of the powers-that-be threatens to bring about a restructuring of reality straight out of Orwell's 1984, where the Ministry of Truth polices speech and ensures that facts conform to whatever version of reality the government propagandists embrace.

Orwell intended 1984 as a warning. Instead, it is being used as a dystopian instruction manual for socially engineering a populace that is compliant, conformist and obedient to Big Brother.

Nothing good can come from techno-censorship. Again, to quote

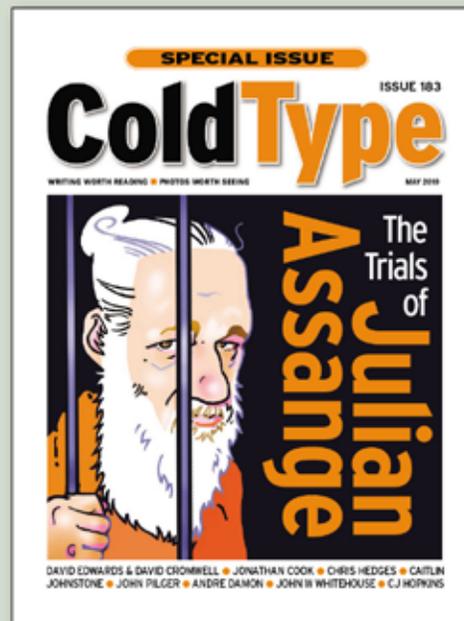
Glenn Greenwald: “Censorship power, like the tech giants who now wield it, is an instrument of status quo preservation. The promise of the internet from the start was that it would be a tool of liberation, of egalitarianism, by permitting those without money and power to compete on fair terms in the information war with the most powerful governments and corporations. But just as is true of allowing the internet to be converted into a tool of coercion and mass surveillance, nothing guts that promise, that potential, like empowering corporate overlords and unaccountable monopolists to regulate and suppress what can be heard”.

As I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People*, these internet censors are not acting in our best interests to protect us from dangerous, disinformation campaigns. They're laying the groundwork to preempt any “dangerous” ideas that might challenge the power elite's stranglehold over our lives.

Therefore, it is important to recognise the thought prison that is being built around us for what it is: a prison with only one route of escape – free thinking and free speaking in the face of tyranny. **CT**

*John W. Whitehead, is a constitutional lawyer and founder and president of the Rutherford Institute. His books *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and *A Government of Wolves: The Emerging American Police State* are available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). He can be contacted at [johnw@rutherford.org](mailto:johnw@rutherford.org). Nisha Whitehead is the Executive Director of the Rutherford Institute at [www.rutherford.org](http://www.rutherford.org).*

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Joe Allen

# Greta's burning!

*India's farmer uprising is a bizarre world where anti-government 'insurrectionists' are the heroes of the oppressed, exalted by Twitter and international celebrities alike*

America isn't the only country convulsed by unrest. India basically inhabits a parallel dimension with all the same discordant elements – furious mobs, a corporate-friendly government, a “deadly insurrection”, a militarised capital swarming with troops, subversive foreign influence, knots of self-contradiction, and Twitter deciding who gets a voice and who doesn't.

One big difference, from a mythic perspective, is who we see cast as the hero and who's the villain – the government or the people, “the commies” or “the fascists”, the power or the uprising?

It started last year when India's farmer unions revolted over three new agriculture laws. Furious growers argued that the laws would disrupt the established order, subvert their bargaining power, and allow corporations to control prices. Prime Minister Modi insists this sweeping modernisation is progress, and everyone should be happy about it.

Negotiations stalled and things got out of hand. The AP reports:

“Tens of thousands of farmers have been hunkering down at the Indian capital's fringes to protest new agricultural laws they say will leave them poorer and at the mercy of corporations. ...

“Their largely peaceful protests turned violent on Jan. 26, India's Republic Day, when a section of the tens of thousands of farmers riding tractors veered from the protest route earlier decided with police and stormed the 17th-century Red Fort in a dramatic escalation.

“Hundreds of police officers were injured and a protester died. Scores of farmers were also injured”.

Those sound like some mean-ass tractors, don't they? You can almost see their steel hoods covered in bobble-head gods and draped with flower garlands, now splattered with blood.

Ready to throw gas on any social justice fire – even at the risk of warming the planet – climate activist and international celebrity Greta Thunberg came slinging the petrol. In early February, she

tweeted out an activist “toolkit” through her 4.8-million followers, directed at the downtrodden farmers. This illicit toolkit included instructions pertaining to an upcoming “Twitter storm”, locations for in-person protests (no mention of social distancing), and Zoom contacts for Western activism coaches.

As a result of Thunberg's mind-control waves, the Delhi Police Cyber Crime Cell has initiated a criminal investigation on charges of sedition, overseas conspiracy, and an attempt to “promote enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race ... and acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony.” Although Thunberg is quoted in the filings, police are mostly focused on the activist toolkit's authors – the Poetic Justice Foundation, based in Canada, whose members are currently operating on Indian soil.

Thunberg's tweet provoked widespread anger in the Indian establishment. Upper caste counter-protesters gathered to torch her image in effigy. An award-worthy photograph shows belligerent Brahmins holding what



**UNDER FIRE:** Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg.

looks like a smouldering smudge-stick and burning a mean moustache onto the 18-year-old's elf-like visage.

Images of the BDSM-inspired pop singer Rihanna – the first Western superstar to draw attention to the farmers' efforts – were also burned in a ritualistic effort to purge

Mother India's body of disruptive spirits.

In an Indian-American twist, Vice-President Kamala Harris's fiery niece Meena Harris drew unintentional parallels between the bloody farmer uprising and the recent "deadly insurrection" at the US Capitol. Connecting dots like an obsessive info wars agent, Meena writes: "It's no

coincidence that the world's oldest democracy [the USA] was attacked not even a month ago, and as we speak, the most populous democracy [India] is under assault. This is related. We ALL should be outraged by India's internet shutdowns and paramilitary violence against farmer protesters. ...

"'Unity' begins with truth. 'Healing' is not possible without accountability. Stay loud. Accept nothing less".

So far, Modi has rejected this global matriarchy's demands. In scenes reminiscent of Washington DC's "Green Zone", Indian security forces have erected iron spikes and barbed wire all around Delhi. Rows of bored soldiers in riot gear stand ready to push back the wrath of lower caste farmers. You'd think they were following the Biden administration's lead.

Human Rights Watch director Meenakshi Ganguly laments: "The Indian authorities' response to the protests has focused on discrediting peaceful protesters, harassing critics of the government, and prosecuting those re-

porting on the events”.

Despite support from global allies, India’s paddy-plodding underdogs are being defamed by one reckless outburst. And it does look pretty bad, at least from a certain angle. Hundreds of cops injured and one protester dead. Goddamn, that guy must have gone down swinging.

For the world’s salty throwbacks, Greta Thunberg is the face of our scolding global elite. Imagine what it must look like to a traditionalist Hindu – faced with feeding hundreds of millions of starving people – to have a scowling Swedish teenager criticise your attempts at agricultural modernisation from the pinnacle of European splendour. It’s gotta make them mad as hell.

In an attempt to strike back at foreign disrupters – it’s unclear who’s punching up or down at this point – Indian minister Vijay Kumar Singh hit a note somewhere between RussiaGate and Q-Anon. He took aim at the clockwork elf: “The deleted tweet of Greta Thunberg has revealed the real designs of a conspiracy at an international level against India. Need to investigate the parties which are pulling the strings of this evil machinery. ... Conspiracies at this scale often get exposed. ...

“[I]nternational celebrities suddenly turned sensitive toward farmer issues. All have something in common. They don’t know anything about India, the farm laws or farmer issues. Their 280 characters of fame are over”.

As if to blow a smoke-ring at Greta’s face, one of the few con-

## Rows of bored soldiers in riot gear stand ready to push back the wrath of lower caste farmers

cessions the government made is granting the farmers’ right to continue stubble-burning. The new ag laws had halted the practice due to terrible pollution. It’s one hell of a Second World problem.

For two months out of the year, farmers in the Punjab and the Haryana burn around 35-million tons of rice paddy straw, sending great plumes of smoke out across the land. These noxious clouds regularly engulf Delhi and other cities, leaving asthmatic children coughing to the sky, “How dare you!”

In India’s topsy-turvy world, Big Tech is applying pressure on the political system, except in this case, they refuse to silence dissidents. CBS News reports: “The Indian government warned Twitter ... that it could take some unspecified action against the social media platform for its move to ‘unilaterally’ un-block more than 250 accounts that it suspended on Monday, at the government’s request, over the use of a controversial hashtag [#ModiPlanning-FarmerGenocide].

“The government had labelled the tweets using the hashtag, which accuses officials of planning a ‘genocide’ of farmers, part of a ‘motivated campaign to

abuse, inflame and create tension in society on unsubstantiated grounds.’”

Seeming to have no idea what their opponents were actually talking about, and grasping for any justification to squash dissidents, the Indian government shot back: “Incitement to genocide is not freedom of speech; it is a threat to law and order”.

Twitter held the moral high ground. Figuring that MAGAs don’t read international news, the company spun one of its Brahma-faces around and said: “[I]n keeping with our principles of defending protected speech and freedom of expression, we have not taken any action on accounts that consist of news media entities, journalists, activists, and politicians”.

It really is a weird alternate universe out there beyond the Punjab. The same global elite attempting to “unify” the United States into a Technocratic Corporate Superstate by inciting BLM and squeezing the MAGA middle is simultaneously helping India’s low caste farmers subvert Big Ag and overturn their elected government.

Capricious as ever, the Highest Earthly Powers smile on the armed occupation of DC while sneering at the iron spikes around Delhi.

You never know how your own nation looks to the wider world until you’ve sampled the psychodrama of a foreign land. **CT**

*Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. Presently, he lives in the western shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Read his weekly newsletter at [www.JOEBOT.xyz](http://www.JOEBOT.xyz).*



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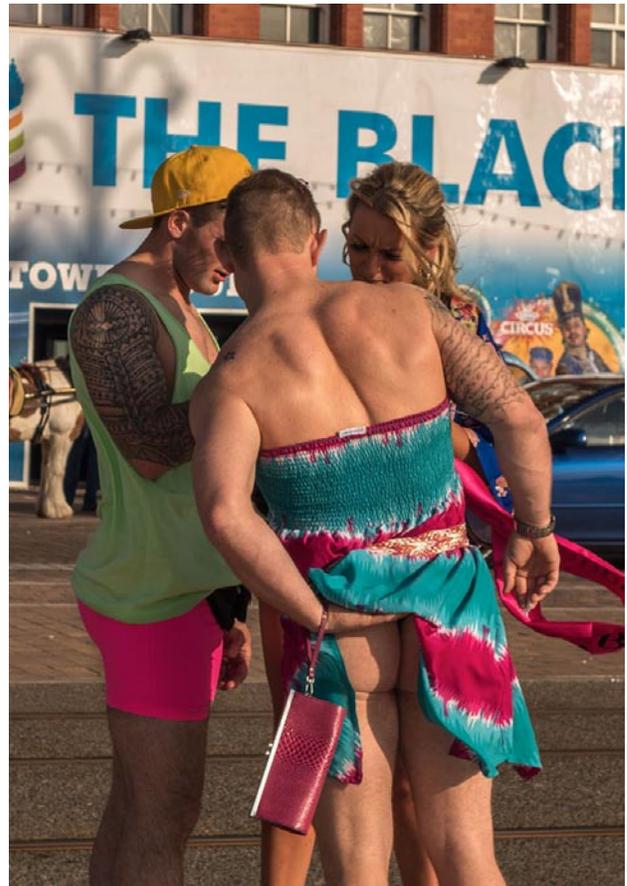


*Dougie Wallace*

## The world we left behind

*Dougie Wallace's first photobook, **Stags, Hens & Bunnies**, featured packs of tipsy brides and drunken grooms marauding through the streets of an English seaside resort in a cavalcade of laughter, booze and vomit. Seven years later, we return to the time before Covid with some of the photos that didn't get into the book ...*





Uptight citizens of the English seaside resort of Blackpool weren't amused when Dougie Wallace's first photobook, *Stags, Hens & Bunnies: A Blackpool Story*, was published back in 2014. Wallace's images showcased the unrestrained antics of soon-to-be-weds in the working class resort six years before Covid-19 plunged Britain's towns and cities into a year-long (so far) clampdown on pubs, parties, shopping – and fun.

Parts of the country's tabloid media didn't approve of those bridal festivities, either: the *Daily Mail* claimed the "once family-friendly resort has plunged downmarket", and traditional stag and hen parties had "degenerated into something rather less innocent". No matter; the newspaper balanced its outrage by giving readers a spread of eight of Wallace's pictures!



In claiming that the “riotous stag and hen parties are tarnishing Blackpool’s family image”, the *Mail* had forgotten, as the text that accompanied Wallace’s book’s vibrant photos, pointed out, that it was “a snapshot of our times – a graphic nightmare. Tony Blair’s dream of a continental style Britain, sipping wine with impunity, has mutated into Cameron’s binge-blighted Britain, with cheap alcohol available around the clock and a mainline railway transporting carriages of escapees from the realities of social decline.

“Although the smutty uncle of all seaside towns is still attracting some thirteen-million visitors a year, some of the town’s businessmen are un-





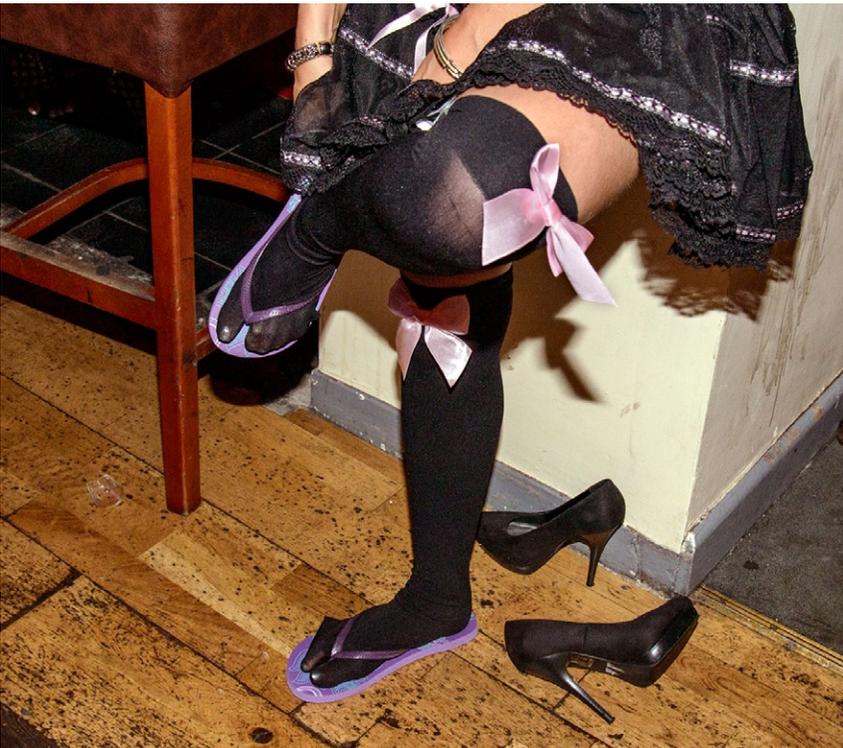


settled by its source of revenue. But as long as the night-time economy brings millions of pounds to the town, the stag and hen parties will still be welcome. These ‘celebratory rites of passage’ create employment and have kept Blackpool afloat”.

Seven years on, the town’s people will probably look back at this carefree, unrestrained hedonism in a more tolerant light. Blackpool’s drink-fueled celebrations may have soiled the streets and shocked some of the citizens, but the present-day climate of lockdown, Covid-fear, and bankrupt business is much more damaging to the community – and its economy – than the sight of exuberant brides and their soon-to-be partners enjoying a final night of singledom.

*Tony Sutton*





The photographs on these pages are out-takes from Dougie Wallace's book, *Stags, Hens and Bunnies: A Blackpool Story*, published in 2014 by Dewi Lewis Publishing – [www.dewilewis.com](http://www.dewilewis.com) Price £28

● Dougie Wallace's latest book is *Bus Response* (see details on Page 27)

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Roberta Gilchrist

# Discovering a nation's ancient history

*New Netflix film provides a refreshingly accurate portrait of ancient secrets uncovered inside ancient mounds*

Edith Pretty was convinced that the mounds on her land in Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England, held important archaeological secrets. In 1939, on the eve of the World War II, she was proven right as the sumptuous ship burial of an Anglo-Saxon king was uncovered. For a nation on the brink of war and facing its own “dark age”, the Sutton Hoo ship burial was a source of pride and inspiration, equivalent to the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Netflix's *The Dig*, based on the 2007 novel of the same name by John Preston, recounts the tale of this remarkable find. It transformed understanding of the “dark age” of the 7th-century. Before this discovery, a dearth of written sources was presumed to signal an absence of culture in this period.

Films tend to portray archaeologists as treasure-hunters or forensic detectives – notably the Indiana Jones franchise. However, this Netflix dramatisation approaches archaeology with a new level of subtlety and accuracy, probing death, loss and memory – key themes in the archaeological

study of the past.

The funerary mound contained the remains of a decayed oak ship, 27m in length, which had been dragged from the nearby River Deben to serve as a royal tomb. More than 250 artefacts revealed the sophistication of East Anglia in Anglo-Saxon times. There were riches garnered from across the known world, including silver bowls and spoons from Byzantium and gold dress accessories set with Sri Lankan garnets.

Although the body had long since disappeared, the personal regalia of a warrior-king survived, his sword, shield and ceremonial helmet. He is believed to be King Raedwald, whose reign corresponded with the early seventh-century date of the coins contained in a gold purse (c. 610-635CE).

*The Dig* focuses on the relationship between Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan) and Basil Brown (Ralph Fiennes), the local amateur excavator hired to investigate.

It draws on genuine elements of the central character's biography, including Pretty's bereave-

ment after her husband's death and the diagnosis of her terminal illness (she died in 1942). Like many at this time, Pretty was fascinated by “spiritualism”, the idea that we can communicate with the dead through the use of a spiritual medium. Spiritualism may have spurred her archaeological patronage, just as it motivated investigations at other famous sites, especially Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset.

When the ship is revealed, Pretty and Brown are joined by “professional” archaeologists, the real-life Sutton Hoo excavation team. However, dramatic licence changes their roles and ages to emphasise the hierarchical character of 1930s archaeology.

The film gives an accurate portrayal of the archaeological excavation in the 1930s, conducted using workmen with just a few skilled excavators and qualified academics. There is careful attention to archaeological detail, emphasising that the ship's timbers had virtually disappeared, surviving as nothing more than iron rivets and a silhouette stained in the sand.

However, the rivalry between



Carey Mulligan and Ralph Fiennes in *The Dig*. Below: Replica of one of the artifacts.

the self-taught amateur “digger”, Basil Brown, and the Cambridge-educated archaeologists is perhaps exaggerated. Brown is portrayed as having native, intuitive knowledge. He could “examine a handful of soil from anywhere in Suffolk and know exactly



what farm it came from”. Although he was indeed self-taught, Brown was not exactly an amateur. He was employed as an excavator by Ipswich Museum for 30 years and was highly respected by the local archaeological community.

The Cambridge men also patronise the only female archaeologist, the real-life Peggy Piggott (Lily James), when she arrives accompanying her more experienced husband, Stuart. Peggy is welcomed because her slight frame will be ideal for working in

the delicate conditions of the ship’s hull. She’s shown unearthing the first gold artefact (which really happened) but there’s no hint of the meticulous field skills for which the real Peggy was known during her illustrious career. Indeed, few professional skills are depicted at all: the archaeologists

were brought in to draw, plan and record archaeological features – not simply to extract artefacts.

The professionals are portrayed cynically, exploiting the discovery to bolster personal and institutional reputations. In contrast, Pretty and Brown reflect philosophically on the meaning of the grave and the need to respect the memory of its human inhabitant.

As the skeleton of the ship emerges from the sand, it is a metaphor for the transience of human life, particularly poignant

with war looming. Edith says to Brown, “We die and decay and don’t live on”. He counters, “From the first human hand-print on a cave wall, we’re part of something continuous, so we don’t really die”. The idea that all human lives are connected through the thread of the past is at the heart of burial archaeology, which is not about treasure but unearthing relationships between the living and their memories of the dead.

The Sutton Hoo ship burial was certainly exceptional in its wealth and state of preservation. Further excavations at Sutton Hoo revealed richly furnished royal burials in other mounds, including those of women and children, while comparable high-status burials have been excavated elsewhere, such as the Prittlewell Prince in Essex.

Today Anglo-Saxon archaeology explores many different social roles and lifestyles, including (pagan) women-priests and ordinary farmers. The archaeologists themselves are also a more diverse and inclusive lot, committed to working with local communities to discover their past, and giving careful reflection to ethical issues – such as whether, and under what circumstances, we should disturb the remains of the ancient dead. *The Dig* reminds us that the role of archaeology is not in treasure-seeking, but in reflecting on our complex relationship to the past, and how and why we value it. **CT**

*Roberta Gilchrist is Professor of Archaeology, University of Reading. This article was first published at [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)*

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C.J. Hopkins

# The (New Normal) war on domestic terror

*Things aren't looking so good. I guess I'll see you in a quarantine camp, or in the psych ward, or an offshore detention facility. Or maybe in the streets*

If you enjoyed the Global War on Terror, you're going to love the new War on Domestic Terror! It's just like the original Global War on Terror, except that this time the "Terrorists" are all "Domestic Violent Extremists" ("DVEs"), "Homegrown Violent Extremists" ("HVEs"), "Violent Conspiracy-Theorist Extremists" ("VCTEs"), "Violent Reality Denialist Extremists" (VRDEs), "Insurrectionary Micro-Aggressionist Extremists" ("IMAEs"), "People Who Make Liberals Feel Uncomfortable" ("PWMLFUs"), and anyone else the Department of Homeland Security wants to label an "extremist" and slap a ridiculous acronym on.

According to a "National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin" issued by the DHS on Jan 27, these DCEs, HVEs, VCTEs, VRDEs, IMAEs, and PWMLFUs are "ideologically-motivated violent extremists with objections to the exercise of governmental authority" and other "perceived grievances fuelled by false narratives." They are believed to be "motivated by a range of issues, including anger over Covid-19 restrictions, the

2020 election results, police use of force", and other dangerous "false narratives" (e.g., the existence of the "deep state", "herd immunity", "biological sex", "God", and so on).

"Inspired by foreign terrorist groups", and "emboldened by the breach of the US Capitol Building", this diabolical network of "domestic terrorists" is "plotting attacks against government facilities", "threatening violence against critical infrastructure", and actively "citing misinformation and conspiracy theories about Covid-19".

For all we know, they might be huddled in the "Wolf's Lair" at Mar-a-Lago right now, plotting a devastating terrorist attack with those WMDs we never found in Iraq, or generating population-adjusted death-rate charts going back 20 years, or posting pictures of "extremist frogs" on the Internet.

The Department of Homeland Security is "concerned", as are its counterparts throughout the global capitalist empire. The (New Normal) War on Domestic Terror isn't just a war on American

"domestic terror". The "domestic terror" threat is international. France has just passed a "Global Security Law" banning citizens from filming the police beating the living snot out of people (among other "anti-terrorist" provisions). In Germany, the government is preparing to install an anti-terror moat around the Reichstag. In the Netherlands, the police are cracking down on the VCTEs, VRDEs, and other "angry citizens who hate the system", who have been protesting over nightly curfews.

Suddenly, everywhere you look (or at least if you are looking in the corporate media), "global extremism networks are growing". It's time for Globocap to take the gloves off again, root the "terrorists" out of their hidey holes, and roll out a new official narrative.

Actually, there's not much new about it. When you strip away all the silly new acronyms, the (New Normal) War on Domestic Terror is basically just a combination of the "War on Terror" narrative and the "New Normal" narrative, i.e., a militarisation of the so-called



“New Normal” and a pathologisation of the “War on Terror”. Why would GloboCap want to do that, you ask?

I think you know, but I’ll go ahead and tell you.

See, the problem with the original “Global War on Terror” was that it wasn’t actually all that global. It was basically just a war on Islamic “terrorism” (i.e., resistance to global capitalism and its post-ideological ideology), which was fine as long as GloboCap was just destabilising and restructuring the Greater Middle East.

It was put on hold in 2016, so that GloboCap could focus on defeating “populism” (i.e., resistance to global capitalism and its post-ideological ideology), make an example of Donald Trump, and

demonise everyone who voted for him (or just refused to take part in their free and fair elections), which they have just finished doing, in spectacular fashion. So, now it’s back to “War on Terror” business, except with a whole new cast of “terrorists”, or, technically, an expanded cast of “terrorists”. (I rattled off a list in my previous column.)

In short, GloboCap has simply expanded, recontextualised, and pathologised the “War on Terror” (i.e., the war on resistance to global capitalism and its post-ideological ideology).

This was always inevitable, of course. A globally-hegemonic system (e.g., global capitalism) has no external enemies, as there is no territory “outside” the system. Its

only enemies are within the system, and thus, by definition, are insurgents, also known as “terrorists” and “extremists”. These terms are utterly meaningless, obviously. They are purely strategic, deployed against anyone who deviates from GloboCap’s official ideology ... which, in case you were wondering, is called “normality” (or, in our case, currently, “New Normality”).

In earlier times, these “terrorists” and “extremists” were known as “heretics”, “apostates”, and “blasphemers”. Today, they are also known as “deniers”, e.g., “science deniers”, “Covid deniers”, and recently, more disturbingly, “reality deniers”. This is an essential part of the pathologisation of the “War on Terror” narrative.

The new breed of “terrorists” do not just hate us for our freedom ... they hate us because they hate “reality”. They are no longer our political or ideological opponents ... they are suffering from a psychiatric disorder. They no longer need to be argued with or listened to ... they need to be “treated”, “reeducated”, and “deprogrammed”, until they accept “Reality”. If you think I’m exaggerating the totalitarian nature of the “New Normal/War on Terror” narrative, just read a recent op-ed in the *New York Times* exploring the concept of a “Reality Czar” to deal with our “Reality Crisis”.

This is just the beginning, of course. The consensus (at least in GloboCap circles) is, the (New Normal) War on Domestic Terror will probably continue for the next 10 to 20 years, which should provide the global capitalist ruling classes with more than enough time to carry out the “Great Reset”, destroy what’s left of human society, and condition the public to get used to living like cringing, neo-feudal peasants who have to ask permission to leave their houses. We’re still in the initial “shock and awe” phase (which they will have to scale back a bit eventually), but just look at how much they’ve already accomplished.

The economic damage is literally incalculable ... millions have been plunged into desperate poverty, countless independent businesses crushed, whole industries crippled, developing countries rendered economically dependent (i.e., compliant) for the foreseeable future, as billionaires amassed over \$1-trillion in wealth and su-

## **GloboCap has transformed the majority of the global masses into a paranoid totalitarian cult**

pranational corporate behemoths consolidated their dominance across the planet.

And that’s just the economic damage. The attack on society has been even more dramatic. GloboCap, in the space of a year, has transformed the majority of the global masses into an enormous, paranoid totalitarian cult that is no longer capable of even rudimentary reasoning. (I’m not going to go on about it here ... at this point, you either recognise it or you’re in it.) They’re actually lining up in parking lots, the double-masked members of this Covidian cult, to be injected with an experimental “vaccine” that they believe will save the human species from a virus that causes mild to moderate symptoms in roughly 95 percent of those “infected,” and that over 99 percent of the “infected” survive.

So, it is no big surprise that these same mindless cultists are gung-ho for the (New Normal) War on Domestic Terror, and the upcoming globally-televised show trial of Donald Trump for “inciting insurrection,” and the ongoing corporate censorship of the Internet, and can’t wait to be issued their “Freedom Passports,” which will allow them to take part in “New Normal” life – double-masked and socially-distanced, naturally

– while having their every movement and transaction, and every word they write on Facebook, or in an email, or say to someone on their smartphones, or in the vicinity of their 5G toasters, recorded by GloboCap’s Intelligence Services and their corporate partners, subsidiaries, and assigns.

These people have nothing at all to worry about, as they would never dream of disobeying orders, and could not produce an original thought, much less one displeasing to GloboCap, if you held a fake apocalyptic plague to their heads.

As for the rest of us “extremists”. “domestic terrorists”, “heretics,” and “reality deniers”, (i.e., anyone criticising global capitalism, or challenging its official narratives, and its increasingly totalitarian ideology, regardless of our specific DHS acronyms), I wish I had something hopeful to tell you, but, the truth is, things aren’t looking so good. I guess I’ll see you in a quarantine camp, or in the psych ward, or an offshore detention facility ... or, I don’t know, maybe I’ll see you in the streets. **CT**

**C.J. Hopkins** is an award-winning American playwright, novelist and political satirist based in Berlin. His plays are published by Bloomsbury Publishing and Broadway Play Publishing, Inc. His dystopian novel, *Zone 23*, is published by Snoggswothy, Swaine & Cormorant. Volumes I and II of his *Consent Factory Essays* are published by Consent Factory Publishing, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Amalgamated Content, Inc. He can be reached at [www.cjhopkins.com](http://www.cjhopkins.com) or [www.consentfactory.org](http://www.consentfactory.org).

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IN DREAMS: All masked up and ready to cue at The Excellent Pool Hall and Bar in Tirana, Albania.

*Linh Dinh*

# Good morning, Albania!

*It's good to swap the police-state glare of Egypt's military rulers for the welcoming embrace of a tranquil, bustling Tirana*

I'm in downtown Tirana, Albania. My seventh floor room has a fridge, desk, three chairs and a wardrobe. There's also an electric kettle, which is useful not just for hot beverages, but instant noodles and soups. Heat is love.

My private bathroom is clean

and new, with plenty of hot water, and strong shower jets. My wide window affords a panorama of tenements backstopped by a mountain range. Each dawn, a soft, considerate sun rises, cheering my prospect. On my wall, there's a nice kitschy painting of snow-capped, craggy peaks.

For all these privileges, I pay just \$427 for four weeks.

Although my landlady speaks no English, there's no problem. Tiny, pleasant and hushed, she's in the next room. Walking by her door, I can barely hear her television murmuring, if she's there. In her '60's, she's as scatterbrained



**WALL OF FAME!:** The smile of footballer Mo Salah on a Cairo wall contrasts with the stiff glares of Sisi, Sadat and Nasser.

as me. When I paid her at check-in, she looked perplexed, before remembering she had left her money purse under my mattress. Fishing it out, she giggled at her own battiness. Still amused at herself, the old bird handed me my change.

With suppressed excitement slightly tinged with dread, I should lift the mattress to see what else she has forgotten? There's liable to be anything, from a broken comb, to tangled hair, to a mummified mermaid. In Egypt, where I was just at, you can book a fully furnished apartment, wink, wink, and get your musty cellar hosed out by the en suite maid.

Leaving Cairo was more eventful than necessary. An airport employee asked repeatedly for

a tip just for lifting my backpack and duffle bag onto the luggage scanner, although I had told him specifically not to, for who needs such a service? Although it was only a minor shakedown, I didn't pay him.

Two security guys then spent five minutes examining my three hard-drives, with one demanding I check them in. After I firmly balked at this, he backed off.

At passport control, an officer steered me to another who said I had to pay \$23 for overstaying my visa. After I explained that Egyptian laws allowed visitors to overstay for up to two weeks without being fined, both officers cracked up and promptly let me through. Guffawing along, I merely blurted, "I loved Egypt so much, I had to stay another week!"

Don't get me wrong. Ordinary Egyptians were fine. On subways, strangers would offer me their seats, since they couldn't stand to see such a white-haired guy standing with his eyes shut. (I often close them to focus or just rest.) Cairo's streets invigorated me, and its architecture is second to none, though awfully decayed

What's wrong with Egypt, above all, is its government. As established by Nasser, it is a police state dominated by the military, with socialist policies that have wrecked its economy.

Since Nasser gave the poor free bread, free land and practically free rent, he was hugely popular, but by chasing out the enterprising class, Nasser destroyed Egypt's development.

Promising a job to every college

graduate, Nasser created a huge bureaucracy of state employees who did almost nothing. His universal welfare triggered a huge population explosion, so now, there are over 100-million Egyptians on a land meant for a fraction of that.

Nasser's revolutionary zeal also led him to intervene in Yemen, a catastrophe that drained his treasury and weakened his army, but the great, charismatic man with plenty of bon mots couldn't see this, obviously, for he kept on threatening Israel most bombastically. Only a spectacularly humiliating defeat in the Six-Day War could puncture Nasser's hubris.

Arriving in Cairo just before New Year, I noticed many armed soldiers, and even armoured vehicles, around Tahrir Square. This was a preventive measure against crowd disturbance or terrorism during the holiday, I thought, but the military never left. It's there, 24/7, primarily to prevent fresh protests against the government.

A clerk at my hotel was jailed for a month just for snapping photos of a protest, but luckily, he wasn't abused while locked up, a too common practice there.

Twice, I was accosted by armed cops, one with an assault rifle, for merely taking photos of Coptic churches. Outside Faisal Metro Station, an un-uniformed cop grabbed my camera after I had snapped some funky food stand. He then forced me to follow him inside to see his supervisor. In Alexandria, an angry cop told me to stop photographing a tenement.

Seeing a smiling Sisi often, I couldn't help but photograph his face at butcher stalls, a laundry service, draped on a hotel, inside

## ***Sometimes Sisi's face would be slashed, but I wasn't dumb enough to post such an image while still in Egypt***

a subway station, over a café, another café, a snack and soft drink stand, at a machine part dealer, a coffee and tea store, clothing store, behind a vegetable stand, by a garage, stuck to a tenement, on the side of a truck, outside a spice shop, paired with the Sphinx, saluting himself, and here shaking hands with the always clueless Pope Francis.

Sometimes, though, Sisi's face would be slashed, but listen, man, I wasn't dumb enough to post such an image while still in Egypt.

If you see your great leader everywhere, most likely your country's at war, either against an outside foe or, much worse, against you!

Few nations suffered as much under Communism as Albania, and its 47-year-long nightmare only ended in 1992. Arriving by sea shortly afterwards, the US author Paul Theroux was swarmed and snatched at by a howling mob: "Third World, I thought, but it was the only Third World scene I had ever witnessed that was entirely populated by Europeans – the most dissolute and desperate and poverty-stricken and rapacious, lunging at me, following just behind me, demanding money".

Living in Italy during 2002-04, I encountered my first Albanians. There, they had a reputation for organised crime, but that's common for any poor recent immigrant group, anywhere. In my village of Certaldo, they only stood out occasionally by squatting, which lent them a vaguely Oriental aura.

Last year in North Macedonia, I saw many more Albanians, but since there's a turf war there between nominally Muslim Albanians and the majority Christian Slavs, they're not spoken of too highly. Any population, though, is only fully itself on its home turf, so to really see Albanians, one must come to Albania.

On the packed plane from Athens, I had to be the only foreigner, for I didn't hear any other language spoken at the gate, on the apron bus or the plane itself. Right away, I could tell Albanians couldn't have been too Muslim, for no woman had her hair covered, a stark contrast to Egypt.

Athens' airport was very elegant and well-organised, by the way, though my impression was perhaps boosted by a lovely Aegean Airlines employee who somehow thought I was an actor. Doing some kung fu kicks and punches, she gushed, "You've never been asked that? You look so strong!" Flabbergasted, I could only laugh it off, "Uh, I look homeless".

Tirana's airport was much more modest, but still user-friendly, with courteous, efficient employees, so just like that, I was in a taxi heading into town, with the correct fare quickly agreed upon.

All the tenements and shops outside seemed reasonably neat, but as we entered Tirana, a few beggars appeared. One man pushed a



**OPEN ALL HOURS:** The Flocafe at Athens airport.

baby carriage in the dark between cars. Hobbling along, another was on crutches with a deformed leg. After we exited the highway, however, there were no more beggars among the bright shops.

In the taxi, the driver had the radio on. Listening to the news, I could pick out individual words, at least, if not understanding them. Wandering the streets the next morning, I could identify so many cognates, such as *avokat*, *bileta*, *avioni*, *makina*, *sigurimi*, *penale*, *shkolla*, *ore*, *pule*, *shnicel*, *proshute*, *revista*, *libraria*, *argjendari*, *pantallona* and *bluza*, etc., that Albania instantly became familiar in ways that Egypt, South Korea or Laos, say, could not.

Though quarantined for more than four decades, Albania never left Europe, so as one who studied

French from kindergarten, lived for 3-and-a-half years on this continent and writes primarily in English, I should feel an immediate affinity for this society. Plus, its agony under Communism echoes that of my native Vietnam.

Albanians seem relaxed. Even when in packs, young men don't appear aggressive. Neither swaggering nor smirking, they don't need to convince you they're gangstas, ready to kick your ass.

There's almost no littering. On such clean sidewalks, I refrain from tossing even a toothpick. There are also fewer graffiti here than in any Western city I've visited. In Germany, they mar just about every building. (In South Korea, graffiti are most noticeable

around American military bases, as sprayed by Yankee soldiers.)

Cafes and bakeries are open at 7 a.m. Restaurant service is fast and courteous. No one is slovenly. Buses are new. When I can't understand a middle-aged barista, a young lady at the next table promptly translates for me, in perfect English, so we talk a bit.

It's just before 8 a.m., and she's about to go to her German class, for in September, she'll emigrate to Frankfurt, where she has a brother.

"That's exciting, no?"

Smiling, she merely shrugs.

Of course, it's exciting, though scary also. To assimilate into any culture is always a drawn out, challenging process, requiring tremendous willpower, so keep that in mind when it's your turn

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to dive from a burning, listing and sinking ship.

At this point, though, it's far from clear which vessel is sailing more smoothly, the German or Albanian one, but should her life turn sour overseas, she can always come back to tranquil, yet bustling, Tirana.

In nearly five months in South Korea, I never had such a spontaneous conversation, but that peninsula is not called the Hermit Kingdom for nothing. Albanians are more open. To be fair, though, they're also more comfortable with English.

All the English I've seen on Albanian signs and menus is free of misspellings or grammatical errors. Unlike in Cairo, there's no "QUALITY MEET" advertised at a butcher shop.

Speaking of which, "Mishit Hallall" is often seen here, so it's still a Muslim country, though you wouldn't know it from how people are dressed. As the westernmost reach of the Ottoman Empire, and the whitest country in Dar al-Islam, Albania is an anomaly, but if you go back far enough, Christianity was also an alien import. No God is intrinsic to anywhere.

On Rruga Ibrahim Rugova, I paused to check out used books for sale on the sidewalk. Among the titles were Stefan Zweig's meditations on Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, Henryk Sienkiewicz' *Adolescents*, Balzac's *Père Goriot* and, naturally, several volumes by Ismail Kadare. Granted, there was also garbage, like Ulli Weiss' book on Sylvester Stallone, but trash is a given in any culture. You must judge what rises above it, if anything.

Also browsing books was a

## ***Suddenly, Americans are told they can't leave their house for weeks on end. Even Enver Hoxha never tried this stunt***

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young man who turned out to be a popular travel vlogger, as I would find out after we had sat down at a nearby café.

It's very difficult to travel with an Albanian passport, Juli said. "You practically have to beg during the interview at an embassy". Despite this, Juli has gone as far as Indonesia and Malaysia. Arriving in Kuala Lumpur as Covid erupted, he was immediately quarantined inside his hostel, so he saw almost nothing of that idyllic nation.

After citizens from more prestigious countries like the US, UK and France had been evacuated, Juli was still stuck at this hostel with people from Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Syria and South Sudan. He laughed at this dreadful memory.

The more we talked, the more impressed I was by his fluent, rapid and accent-free English, all self-taught, but this 28-year-old is clearly very gifted linguistically. In Italy for two months, he could converse in Italian, "I had to. I had no English then". In Poland for three months, he was chattering in Polish, and he also speaks Greek. (I have an Italian friend, Niccolo, now living in Japan, who's also mind blowingly multilingual.)

Featured on television, Juli is often recognised by strangers on the street, and he's constantly in-

vited by Albanians, from all over, to stay with them.

Like me, he's fascinated by the quotidian. In a YouTube video, Juli interviews an Albanian couple living in Istanbul. With his phone camera, he records every square foot of their modest apartment. Such stuff is life made of, so if you're sick of the ordinary, you're sick of life.

**T**ravelling during Covid is stressful, to say the least, because you don't know if rules will change after you've booked your ticket and made lodging accommodations. Right now, there are only seven countries with no Covid-related entry restrictions or quarantine, and three of them, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, are clustered in the Balkans.

I came to Albania because Americans are allowed to stay here for a year without a residency permit. To add another year, I just need to go next door to North Macedonia, then return after 90 days. Such planning may sound extreme, paranoid even, but we're living through extreme uncertainty.

Totalitarianism conjures up images of jackboots and gulags, but its two core features, affecting all, are the removals of free speech and free movement, and both are happening, with frightening speed, in the supposedly freest countries!

With absurd rules at airports and no-fly list, Americans have been conditioned, for many years now, to accept travelling as not a right, but a privilege granted by the state. Now, suddenly, they are told they can't even leave their house for weeks on end. Even Enver Hoxha never tried this stunt.



**STRANDED:** Juli was stuck at a hostel with people from Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Syria and South Sudan.

Hoxha didn't have internet porn to somewhat pacify his captive population, though. Already addicted to the virtual, why shouldn't you spend all your time inside, masturbating? Brain and stomach empty, you can still leak what's left of your soul.

As I've discovered this past year travelling through South Korea, Serbia, North Macedonia, Lebanon, Egypt and now Albania, lockdowns aren't necessary to combat this way overblown Covid. In each of these countries, I walked daily through crowded streets, ate in restaurants and relaxed in cafes or bars, without a mask, of course, or any social distancing. Within touching distance of my kind, I happily ate and drank.

As I laughed and bantered with some Egyptian good old boys in Cairo's Horreya [Liberty] Bar, I couldn't help but think how preposterous it was that taverns were fully open in Islamic, restrictive Cairo, while they stayed closed in freewheeling Amsterdam, London, Manhattan and Dublin, etc.

On airplanes, too, we're repeatedly warned to keep our masks on, but when meal is served, everyone removes his and happily eats right next to his seatmates, yet no one dies from such reckless exposure! Clearly, there's a sinister agenda at play, and you're the hapless toy, so escape while you can, before all your borders are slammed shut, as has happened in every totalitarian state. Hesitation may be fatal.

Of course, you can also stay and

fight, if there's any fight left in you, but it will take an army, and what will you be fighting for?

Drinking my third beer, I'm in a pool hall in the afternoon. Young and old men drop in for a quick game or two. A boy whose elbows can barely reach over the table is also shooting, and he's not bad. Elvis, James Dean, Humphrey Bogart and Marilyn Monroe are depicted on its sign outside, lending an exotic glamour to this modest establishment. On a wall is a Route 66 sign, representing, obviously, the open road and American freedom, still so sexy.

Little do they know. **CT**

*Linh Dinh's latest book is Postcards from the End of America. His photoblog is [www.linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com](http://www.linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com).*

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Michael Szollosy

# Why, after 100 years, we still fear robots

*We have to be careful not to let fictional robots, and the fears that they build upon, dictate the process of shaping our future*

This is a story you will have heard before.

A genius but completely mad scientist – with the backing of a ruthlessly greedy corporation – creates a sentient robot. The scientist’s intentions for the robot are noble: to help us work, to save us from mundane tasks, to serve its human masters.

But the scientist is over-confident, and blind to the dangers of his new invention. Those that prophesied such warnings are dismissed as luddites, or hopeless romantics not in step with the modern world. But the threat is real: the intelligent, artificial being is not content being a compliant slave.

Despite knowing that it is somehow less than human, the robot starts to ask complex questions about the nature of its own being. Eventually, the robot rises up and overthrows its human master. Its victory points to the inevitable obsolescence of the human race as they are replaced by their robot creations, beings with superior intelligence and physical strength.

This story I’m describing isn’t the latest sci-fi blockbuster from Ridley

Scott, James Cameron, Alex Garland, Denis Villeneuve or Jonathan Nolan – though they have all told versions of this story. This is the plot of the play *R.U.R.* – Rossum’s Universal Robots, by Czech playwright Karl Čapek. And it is now 100 years old, having first been staged in Prague on January 25, 1921.

*R.U.R.* is important for a lot of reasons. It is universally celebrated as the work of art that gave the world the very word “robot”. What is less often remarked is that *R.U.R.* also gave us the basic plot of so very many of our stories about robots and AI that have been made in the last hundred years.

*R.U.R.* also firmly established the robot in the cultural imagination: robots existed on that Prague stage in 1921 long before they actually existed in labs or the real world. The robot is unique in that it is a monster of the human imagination that has actually come to life.

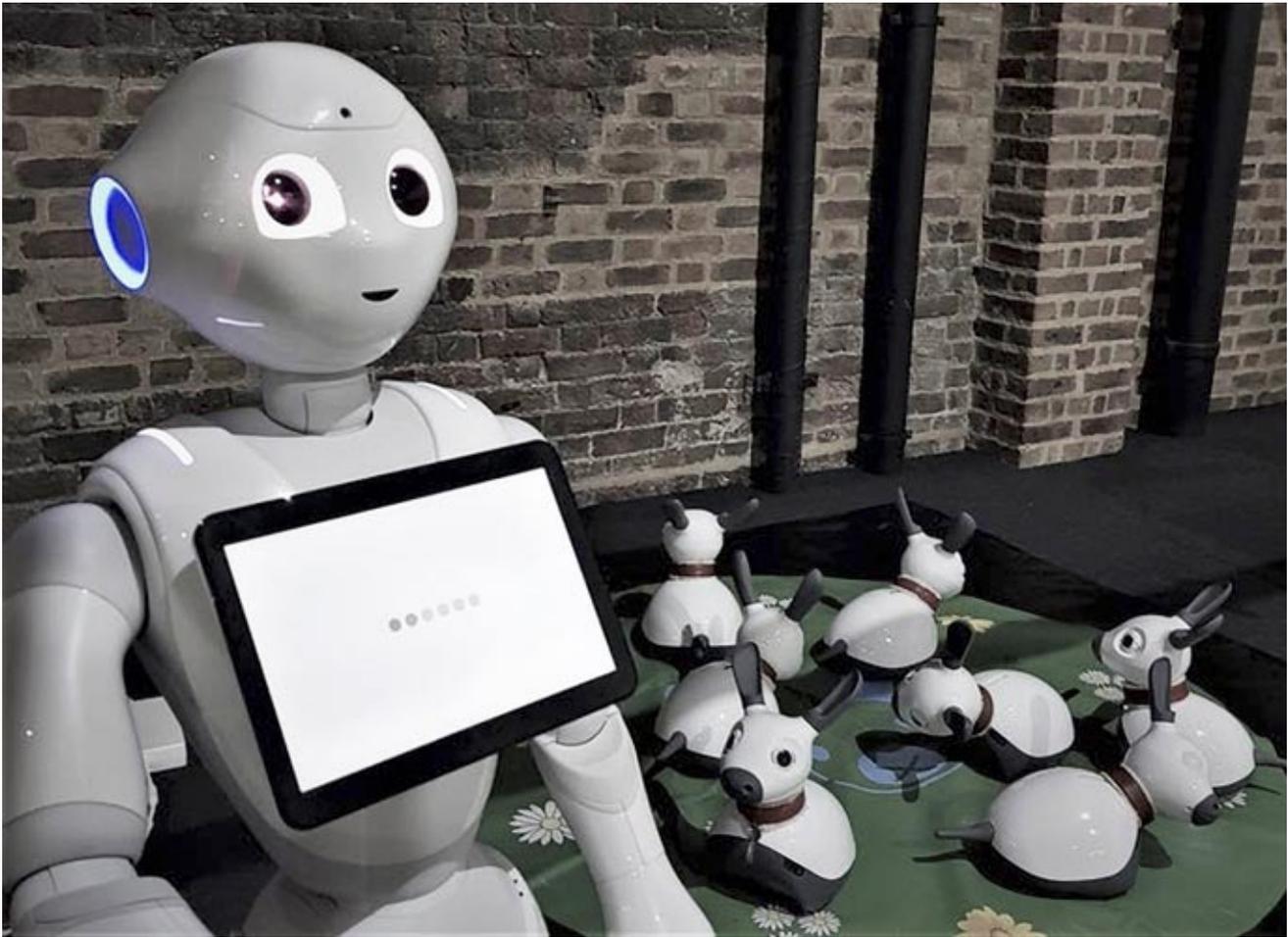
Imagine if Bram Stoker’s vampires, H.G. Wells’s aliens or George A. Romero’s zombies – all monsters that represent to us some of our own cultural anxieties – turned

out to not just be fictions, safely confined to the pages of books or the silver screen. Robots, unlike these other classic monsters, once just imagined, now walk among us, in our factories, our hospitals and our homes.

Despite its age, *R.U.R.* established many of the myths about robots that still endure to this day. Some of these themes (the hubris of the mad scientist, the inevitability of our creations destroying us) can be traced to earlier stories, such as *Frankenstein*. Or they relate to a more general cultural anxiety taking hold in the long shadows of the Industrial Revolution’s smokestacks. But Čapek gave these fears a new, post-human face: the robot.

## The play

The play opens on Domin, the central director of Rossum’s Universal Robots, sitting in his office in the R.U.R. factory on the company’s private island. He is visited by Helena Glory, the daughter of the national president, who wishes to inspect this factory where they produce the artificial people they



**MAN'S BEST FRIEND?:** Robots that work with humans today have no ambitions for world domination.

call “robots”.

Domin tells Helena the history of the factory. In 1920, Old Rossum settled on the island and, motivated by the desire to displace God, he set about creating human life through an industrial process. Old Rossum was joined by his son, an engineer who invented a way to speed up the growth of his father’s artificial people, and turned the new life forms into an intelligent labour force. Young Rossum, in order to improve their efficiency, eliminated anything superfluous to efficient production from the new humans, namely emotions, creativity and desire.

Helena reveals that she is not

touring the factory on behalf of her father, but as a representative of the League of Humanity: she has come to incite the robots to revolution and liberate them from their oppression. Domin and the other R.U.R. employees try to explain to her that Rossum’s workers, being less than human, have no interest in “freedom” or any of her ideals.

The next scene takes place ten years later. A lot happened in the past decade: human workers rose up against the robots, and the robots were given weapons to defend themselves and the profits of their masters. Governments started using robots as soldiers, which led to an increase in the number of wars.

And now, the robots have started to revolt against their human masters. (“Of course they do!” I hear you say. Because this is a story you have heard before. But remember, this is the first time this story was told.)

But, confident that their exclusive power to control the robots’ production will allow them to quell the revolt, the management of R.U.R. decides to press ahead with increasing production of their robots, moving from producing “universal” robots that are all the same to producing “national robots”, in different colours, speaking different languages.

The next scene sees the humans

imprisoned on their island, surrounded by more and more robots. The robots enter the factory and kill all the humans, sparing only Alquist, the lowly engineer, because, the robots say, “he works with his hands like a Robot”.

The final act opens with Alquist, the last human, working in a lab, trying to recover the secrets for making robots because, as he reasons: “If there are no people at least let there be Robots, at least the reflections of man, at least his creation, at least his likeness!” Helena reappears, now a robot herself, along with Robot Primus, their new leader. Seeing them, and coming to understand their love for each other, Alquist names them “Adam and Eve”, realising that they are the beginning of a new species that will repopulate the earth.

I first read *R.U.R.* when I started

## ***R.U.R. isn't really about the future: it's very much a story about the time in which it was written***

studying robotics and AI. Though my background is in literary and cultural studies, and I had a keen interest in 20th-century drama, I had not come across the play before. Then, a decade ago, I started looking into the cultural background of humanity's deep anxiety about robots and new technology. In Čapek's play I found a template for all of the stories and fears about robots that have stayed with us ever since.

Though it was written in a time before there were any real robots, you've probably noticed a few themes that are present in this play that are still a part of the stories people tell about robots today:

- the fear that robots will take human jobs,
- the fear that robots will take over the world,
- the fear that robots will destroy the human race entirely,
- the fear that in doing monotonous tasks, in an assembly line or in an office bureaucracy, we lose something of what makes us specially and uniquely “human”,
- the fear that rational logic will lead to more efficient and autonomous killing and destruction.

This raises two important questions. What inspired Čapek to create his robots? And why aren't to-

day's stories that much different?

The play emerged at a time when there were specific fears about rapid technological progress, ever-expanding bureaucracy, entrenching nationalism, a more ruthless capitalism and fears about the effects all of this was having on human beings. These are all fears that can be recognised in some form today. Indeed, they are often blamed for creating the present political chaos.

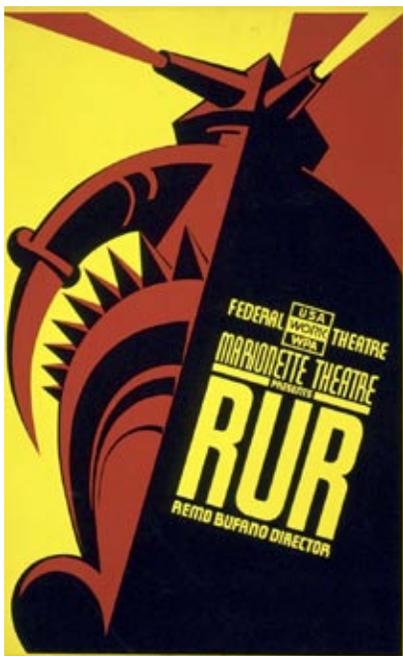
But the play also emerged from historical antecedents. Perhaps most obviously, *R.U.R.* draws its themes from Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*, subtitled *A Modern Prometheus*. That book still looms large over perceptions and fears of technology today – as demonstrated by recent remakes and re-imaginings.

Like all science fiction, *R.U.R.* isn't really about the future: it's very much a story about the time in which it was written. The vicissitudes of the Industrial Revolution had left their mark on the early 20th-century in many dramatic ways, many of which we perhaps too easily overlook over a hundred years later.

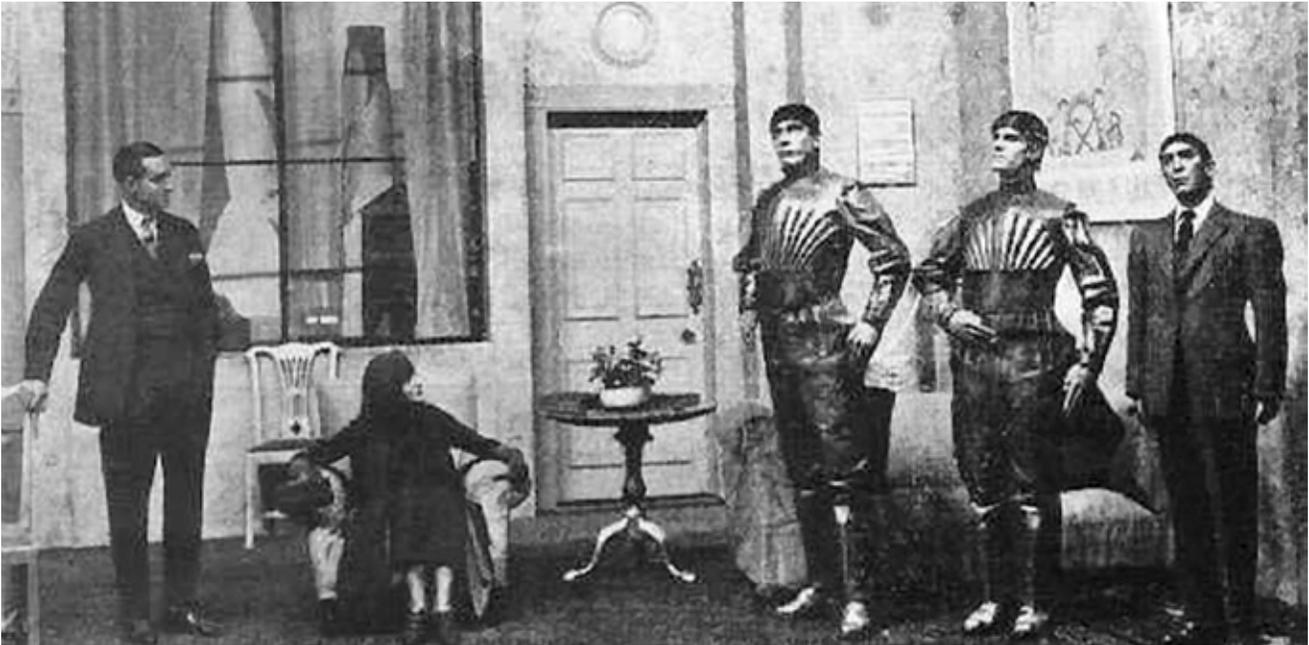
In particular, there was an increasing anxiety about what was happening to humans in this new economy. Čapek was hardly alone in expressing this: *R.U.R.* reflects the concerns regarding dehumanisation that we also see in Sigmund Freud's ruptured patients or in Karl Marx's analyses of the proletariat.

A play staged in 1921 about a slave-workers' revolt against their capitalist masters would have strong resonance with audiences

Art: Wikimedia Commons



THEY'RE COMING: Poster for a 1939 US staging of *R.U.R.*



A scene from *R.U.R.*, which premiered on January 25 1921.

that had witnessed the rise of the Bolsheviks in Russian only a few years earlier. The idea of united, indistinct workers overthrowing their masters (especially when those masters are given names like “Domin” – dominate – and “Busman” – businessman) suggests Čapek’s robots (and their descendents) are socialist heroes, or at least the nightmare of the capitalist, who fears being overthrown.

This idea is reinforced by the image of robots as a collective and unoriginal mass – an image which persists to this day in, for example, *Star Trek’s* Borg, a mass of de-individualised cyborgs with no personal names or identities who fly around the galaxy in cubic spaceship ruthlessly assimilating or destroying other species.

What has changed in the last century, however, is that Čapek’s robots have been transformed from a potent symbol of how workers can overthrow the system that

works against them, to being the most potent symbol of that system itself: the boogie man that will come and steal your job if you don’t agree to a zero-hours contract.

### *Our robots*

It is important to note that Čapek’s robots were not at all what people would consider a robot by today’s standards, either those in the labs or on the screen. Čapek’s robots were more like genetically modified or cloned humans – they are still organic beings, but created through an industrial process.

Nevertheless, Čapek deserves credit for his prescience. For example, he endowed his robots with unlimited, perfect memory, long before anyone had conceived that computers would possess such capabilities.

Before “robot”, the term “automaton” was used to refer to the machines that simulated human or animal behaviour, such as the

intricate mechanical creations of the Renaissance.

The word that Čapek uses in his play was actually the invention of his brother (and sometime writing collaborator) Josef, who was a cubist painter and poet. Čapek’s robot comes from a Czech word *robota*, meaning a forced labourer, more like serf in the feudal system than a slave, emphasising Rossum’s creations’ importance to work and production.

Despite the similar appearance and biological foundations, there are important differences between humans and Čapek’s artificial people. Most importantly, Young Rossum strips his robots of all qualities that would distract them from being more efficient workers. These robots can’t feel pain or emotions. Čapek’s implication is that this is what we do to ourselves when we go to work in the assembly plant, or in the accounting office: in the pursuit of efficiency, we become like machines, devoid of feelings,

creativity, and desire.

Rossum's robots lack desire or wants beyond their basic biological needs. They do not want votes, or to be paid for their labour, because there is nothing they can do or buy to make themselves happy. But the robots are programmed to feel pain, because suffering makes them more technically perfect and industrially efficient.

This idea of the robot as a human lacking a particular human element carries on in almost all of the stories that have been told about robots since: in Isaac Asimov's writings, in multiple versions of *Star Trek*, the *Alien* series, the *Terminator* – the list is endless. In those stories where robots do acquire emotions and feelings (for example, Neil Blomkamp's 2015 film *Chappie*), the introduction of emotions is highlighted as the main problem of the story.

The robots in contemporary stories always break out of the limitations which their human masters have imposed on them: think of the robots that rebel against their programming in *Westworld*, or Ava walking out on Nathan in *Ex Machina*.

But it is the ability to “self-replicate” that seems to be the thing that humans are especially afraid robots will learn to do. Humans understand that losing that power will ultimately cut us out of the loop. Rossum's robots achieve that power, as do Skynet's killing machines in *The Terminator*, and the pilgrims of the 2014 film *Automata*.

It's not just the robots that reappear again and again in our stories. The humans in *R.U.R.* are

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## ***It is the ability to “self-replicate” that seems to be the thing that humans are afraid robots will learn to do***

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written into contemporary narratives as well. There are two figures in particular, Old Rossum and Young Rossum, that are worth our attention.

Behind every robot, or so we imagine, stands the mad scientist who created it, supported by a faceless corporation. In Čapek's play, Old Rossum is the mad scientist in the classic mould of Victor Frankenstein, who “thought only of his godless hocus-pocus”.

The name “Rossum” is taken from the Czech word *rozum*, which means “reason”. This is an important clue as to how Čapek wanted us to understand both the origins of the robot and who it is meant to represent. Old Rossum's son represents the new generation of capitalist monster-makers. He dreams only of his billions and the dividends for shareholders: “And on those dividends humanity will perish”.

The 1927 film *Metropolis* was an early descendant of Čapek's robots, complete with the mad scientist.

This pairing of mad scientist and ruthless corporation emerges from the economic system and industrial conditions (here a Marxist might say, “the mode of production”) that has dominated since the Industrial Revolution. The mad scientist sets in motion

the invention that will undo the human race.

But as the scientist is regarded with at least some affection – as the Promethean hero of romantic imagination – the real villain of the piece must be the ruthless corporation, which exploits the scientist's invention and is the real force that drives humanity to ruin. The scientist is driven by narcissism and hubris, but also the desire to lift humanity. The corporation, on the other hand, acts as a remorseless empathy-vacuum, the psychopath many perceive modern corporations to be.

This pairing crops up again and again. Though Victor Frankenstein never had the benefit of Frankenstein Corp Ltd to amplify his mistakes, the corporation behind Eldon Tyrell in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* makes him a version of Frankenstein better suited to the dystopian 20th century. In the *Terminator* series, Dr Miles Dyson creates a unique and powerful microprocessor, but only Cyberdyne Systems Corporation could use it to create Skynet. And Delos Inc. amplifies the madness of Anthony Hopkins's Dr Robert Ford, the creator of *Westworld*.

## ***We Other Robots***

When Alquist asks why they destroyed all the people, a robot responds: “We wanted to be like people. We wanted to become people.” A mythological history of patricide dates back thousands of years, but there is something more specific going on here with Čapek's conception of robots. One of the robots explains: “You have to kill and rule if you want to be like people. Read history! Read people's books! You



**TAKING ACTION:** The robots break into the factory at the end of Act 3 in a 1928–1929 production of *R.U.R.*

have to conquer and murder if you want to be people!”

“Sentience” or “consciousness” often seem to get equated with violence, as if murderous drives and genocidal tendencies will inevitably follow if robots achieve consciousness. Like gods, or Prometheus, or Frankenstein, Rossum has made robots in our own image. And so robots are just versions of what we fear that we are, or what we are becoming. They are violent and genocidal because humans are violent and genocidal.

When, in series two of HBO’s *Westworld*, Bernard says that all the robots don’t need to be executed because “some of them aren’t hostile,” he is told: “Of course they are. After all, you built them to be like us, didn’t you?” Because the robots we imagine are just projections of our own worst tendencies, our robots want to oppress, domi-

nate, and subjugate us, the way we do to others.

But this only applies to the robots of our imagination. Real robots, the ones that actually exist, have no such desires, and are not even close to being able to comprehend such drives. *R.U.R.* and all of our other work about robots are just stories we tell ourselves to help us make sense of our fears. They are informative, incredibly powerful and compelling, but in the end, they are just that: stories.

We must make a clear distinction between Rossum’s creations and their descendents and the robots that actually exist in our world. We can’t start with the premise that robots will take all of our jobs – they won’t – though, echoing Čapek’s character Busman, it might not be entirely a bad thing if they took some of the less interesting ones. And robots certainly won’t wake up to their inherent superiority over us and

decide to wipe humanity off the face of the earth. It simply isn’t ever going to be part of their programming, nor would autonomous robots ever suffer from the kind of anxiety and irrational hatred that motivates humans to commit genocide.

Conversations about the real-world impact of robots shouldn’t begin by holding on to the fictitious robots of our nightmares, which have no relation to the robots in the real world. Which is why it’s particularly disappointing to see this happen time and again. The European Union Legal Affairs committee in 2017, for example, adopted a legal framework on robotics that started with the Three Laws found in Asimov’s stories, and cites *R.U.R.* and *Frankenstein*. This is a testament to the power of those stories, but it is no way to start a serious conversation about how we can deal legally and ethically with robots as they exist in our world today.

One hundred years after it was first staged, we can still learn a lot from Čapek’s play. It is especially useful in understanding present anxieties about the future. And understanding those fears can be useful in the conversations we have about how to build that future, because those are decisions we can – and absolutely should – make together. But we have to be careful not to let those fictional robots, and the fears that they build upon, dictate the process of shaping that future. **CT**

*Michael Szollosy is a Research Fellow in Robotics, University of Sheffield, England. This article first appeared at [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com).*

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Conn Hallinan

# How will Biden handle China's sea of conflict?

*China poses no military threat, unless Washington chooses to challenge it in its home waters, something Americans neither want nor can afford*

US President Biden faces a host of difficult problems, but in foreign policy its thorniest will be its relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

How it handles issues of trade, security and human rights will either allow both countries to hammer out a working relationship or pull the US into an expensive – and unwinnable – cold war that will shelve existential threats like climate change and nuclear war.

The stakes could not be higher and Washington may be off on the wrong foot.

The first hurdle will be the toxic atmosphere created by the Trump administration. By targeting the Chinese Communist Party as the US's major worldwide enemy, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo essentially called for regime change, which in diplomatic terms means a fight to the death. But while Trump exacerbated tensions between Washington and Beijing, many of the disputes go back more than 70 years. Recognising that history will be essential if the parties are to reach

some kind of detente.

This will not be easy. Polls in the two countries show a growing antagonism in both people's views of one another and an increase of nationalism that may be difficult to control. Most Chinese think the US is determined to isolate their country, surround it with hostile allies, and prevent it from becoming a world power. Many Americans think China is an authoritarian bully that has robbed them of well-paying industrial jobs. There is a certain amount of truth in both viewpoints. The trick will be how to negotiate a way through some genuine differences.

A good place to start is to walk a mile in the other country's shoes.

For most of human history, China was the world's leading economy. But starting with the first Opium War in 1839, British, French, Japanese, German and American colonial powers fought five major and many minor wars with China, seizing ports and imposing trade agreements. The Chinese have never forgotten those dark years,

and any diplomatic approach that doesn't take that history into account is likely to fail.

The most difficult – and dangerous – friction point is the South China Sea, a 1.4-million square mile body of water that borders South China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Borneo, Brunei, Taiwan and the Philippines. Besides being a major trade route, it is rich in natural resources.

Based on its imperial past, China claims ownership of much of the sea and, starting in 2014, began building military bases on island chains and reefs that dot the region. For countries that border the sea, those claims and bases threaten offshore resources and pose a potential security threat. Besides the locals, the Americans have been the dominant power in the region since the end of World War II and have no intention of relinquishing their hold.

While the South China Sea is international waters, it makes up a good deal of China's southern border, and it has been a gateway for invaders in the past. The Chinese have never threatened to



interdict trade in the region – a self-defeating action in any case, since much of the traffic is Chinese goods – but they are concerned about security.

They should be.

The US has five major military bases in the Philippines, 40 bases in Japan and Korea, and its 7th Fleet – based in Yokosuka, Japan – is Washington’s largest naval force. The US has also pulled together an alliance of Australia, Japan, and India – the “Quad” – that coordinates joint actions. These include the yearly Malabar war games that model interdicting China’s sea-bourne energy supplies by closing off the Malacca Straits between Malaysia and Indonesian island of Sumatra.

US military strategy in the area, titled “Air Sea Battle,” aims to control China’s south coast, decapitate the country’s leadership,

and take out its nuclear missile force. China’s counter move has been to seize islands and reefs to keep US submarines and surface craft at arm’s length, a strategy called “Area Denial.” It has also been mostly illegal. A 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration found China’s claims on the South China Sea have no merit. But to Beijing the sea is a vulnerable border. Think for a moment about how Washington would react if China held naval war games off Yokosuka, San Diego or in the Gulf of Mexico. One person’s international waters are another’s home turf.

“The tensions in the South China sea go back to the Chinese civil war between the communists and nationalists, in which the Americans backed the losing side. When the defeated nationalists retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the US guaranteed

the island’s defence, recognised Taiwan as China, and blocked the PRC from UN membership.

After US President Nixon’s trip to China in 1972, the two countries worked out some agreements on Taiwan. Washington would accept that Taiwan was part of China, but Beijing would refrain from using force to reunite the island with the mainland. The Americans also agreed not to have formal relations with Taipei or supply Taiwan with “significant” military weapons.

Over the years, however, those agreements have frayed, particularly during the administration of Bill Clinton.

In 1996 tensions between Taiwan and the mainland led to some sabre rattling by Beijing, but the PRC did not have the capacity to invade the island, and all the parties involved knew that. But Clinton was trying to divert attention

from his dalliance with Monica Lewinsky and a foreign crisis fit the bill, so the US sent an aircraft carrier battle group through the Taiwan Straits. While the Straits are international waters, it was still a provocative move and one that convinced the PRC that it had to modernise its military if it was to defend its coasts.

There is a certain irony here. While the Americans claim that the modernisation of the Chinese navy poses a threat, it was US actions in the Taiwan Straits crisis that frightened the PRC into a crash program to construct that modern navy and adopt the strategy of Area Denial. So, did we nurse the pinion to impel the steel?

Trump certainly exacerbated the tensions. The US now routinely sends warships through the Taiwan Straits, dispatched high level cabinet members to Taipei, and recently sold the island 66 high performance F-16s fighter bombers.

In Beijing's eyes all these actions violate the agreements regarding Taiwan and, in practice, abrogate China's claim on the breakaway province.

It is a dangerous moment. The Chinese are convinced the US intends to surround them with its military and the Quad Alliance, although the former may not be up to the job, and the latter is a good deal shakier than it looks.

While India has drawn closer to the Americans, China is its major trading partner and New Delhi is not about to go to war over Taiwan. Australia's economy is also closely tied to China, as is Japan's.

Having trade relations between countries doesn't preclude them going to war, but it is a deterrent. As for the US military: virtually

## *The Chinese are convinced the US intends to surround them with its military and the Quad Alliance*

all war games over Taiwan suggests the most likely outcome would be an American defeat.

Such a war, of course, would be catastrophic, deeply wounding the world's two major economies and could even lead to the unthinkable – a nuclear exchange. Since China and the US cannot “defeat” one another in any sense of that word, it seems a good idea to stand back and figure out what to do about the South China Sea and Taiwan.

The PRC has no legal claim to vast portions of the South China Sea, but it has legitimate security concerns. And judging from Biden's choices for Secretary of State and National Security Advisor – Anthony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, respectively – it has reason for those concerns. Both have been hawkish on China, and Sullivan believes that Beijing is “pursuing global dominance”.

There is no evidence for this. China is modernising its military, but spends about one third of what the US spends. Unlike the US, it is not building an alliance system – in general, China considers allies an encumbrance – and while it has an unpleasant authoritarian government, its actions are directed at

areas Beijing has always considered part of historical China. The PRC has no designs on spreading its model to the rest of the world. Unlike the US-Soviet Cold War, the differences are not ideological, but are those that arise when two different capitalist systems compete for markets.

China doesn't want to rule the world, but it does want to be the dominant power in its region, and it wants to sell a lot of stuff, from electric cars to solar panels. That poses no military threat to the US, unless Washington chooses to challenge China in its home waters, something Americans neither want nor can afford.

There are a number of moves both countries should make.

First, both countries should dial down the rhetoric and de-escalate their military deployment. Just as the US has the right to security in its home waters, so does China. Beijing, in turn, should give up its claims in the South China Sea and disarm the bases it has illegally established. Both of those moves would help create the atmosphere for a regional diplomatic solution to the overlapping claims of countries in the region.

The cost of not doing this is quite unthinkable. At a time when massive resources are needed to combat global warming, countries are larding their military budgets and threatening one another over islands and reefs that will soon be open sea if climate change does not become the world's focus. **CT**

*Conn Hallinan can be read at [www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com](http://www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com) and at [www.middleempireseries.wordpress.com](http://www.middleempireseries.wordpress.com).*

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Photos: Wikipedia, Wikimedia. Montage: Boynton



TAKE FIVE: (from left) Presidents Nixon, Ford, Clinton, Obama and Trump

*Norman Solomon*

## What about ‘unimpeachable’ offences?

Impeachment dramas on Capitol Hill have routinely skipped over a question that we should be willing to ask even if Congress won’t: “What about a president’s unimpeachable offences?”

The question is the flipside of one that Republican Gerald Ford candidly addressed when he was the House minority leader 50 years ago: “What, then, is an impeachable offence? The only honest answer is that an

impeachable offence is whatever a majority of the House of Representatives considers it to be at a given moment in history.”

By narrowly defining which offences are impeachable, political elites are implicitly telling us which aren’t.

So, when the House approved two articles of impeachment on Donald Trump in December 2019 and one impeachment article in January, the actions were much

too late and much too little.

On Feb. 6, 2017, less than three weeks into Trump’s term, I wrote in *The Hill* newspaper: “From the outset of his presidency, Trump has been violating the US Constitution in a way that we have not seen before and should not tolerate. It’s time for members of Congress to get the impeachment process underway”. I pointed out that “the president continues to violate

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two ‘emoluments’ clauses in the Constitution. One prohibits any gifts or benefits from foreign governments, and the other prohibits the same from the US government or any US state”.

But, at the outset, treating President Trump as unimpeachable – despite those flagrant violations of the Constitution – greased the wheels for the runaway madness of his presidency in the years that followed. As Trump’s destructive joyride went on, reasons to impeach him proliferated. Researchers easily drew up dozens of articles of impeachment. But in the eyes of political elites, as with previous presidents, Trump’s offences were seen as unimpeachable.

Two decades earlier, President Bill Clinton became the second impeached president in US history. The frenzy was akin to vilifying Al Capone for tax evasion. “We all seem to have lost our sense of proportion”, historian Howard Zinn wrote five weeks before Clinton’s impeachment. “Why are the political leaders of the United States and the major media talking of impeaching Bill Clinton for lies about sex, surely not the most important sins of his administration?”

Writing in November 1998, Zinn added, “If Clinton is to be impeached, why do it for frivolous reasons? I can think of at least 10 reasons to impeach him, for acts far more serious than his dalliance with Monica Lewinsky or his lies to Kenneth Starr. I am speaking of matters of life and death for large

numbers of people”.

Zinn cited such matters as missile attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan; Clinton’s refusal to accept a Canadian proposal to ban land mines; continuation of “embargoes on Cuba and Iraq, causing widespread misery in Cuba for lack of food and medicine, and hundreds of thousands of deaths in Iraq according to UN statistics”; and squandering vast funds on the US military while people were suffering and dying at home and abroad due to lack of health care, nutrition and housing.

There was no second impeachment of Clinton after he used a “diplomatic” scam called the Rambouillet accords to justify launching intensive US-led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, without congressional authorisation. Clinton persisted with a continuous air war for more than two months – making history by blatantly violating the War Powers Resolution.

Trump – like Barack Obama and George W. Bush before him – was able to order missile strikes and deploy troops in numerous war-torn countries without congressional constraints. And there was no reason to be concerned that Congress might impeach him for war crimes. The reasons for such impunity are rooted in the history of “unimpeachable” offences.

Consider the proceedings in Congress that forced President Richard Nixon to resign when

impeachment was imminent in mid-1974. The House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment – focusing on Nixon’s obstruction of justice after the Watergate break-in by operatives for his re-election campaign, misuse of federal agencies to violate citizens’ constitutional rights, and noncompliance with congressional subpoenas.

Unmentioned in the Nixon impeachment articles: the Vietnam War that he had prolonged with a vengeance while claiming to seek peace. With methodical deception, Nixon inflicted a massive horrendous war – but his crimes against humanity were judged to be completely unimpeachable.

Also entirely excluded from the Nixon impeachment articles was the merciless US bombardment of northern Laos that slaughtered people who lived on the Plain of Jars, making Laos “the most heavily bombed country per capita in history”. The impeachment articles likewise made no mention of Nixon’s ordering of the secret and illegal carpet-bombing of Cambodia, which began two months into his presidency and persisted year after year.

On July 31, 1973 – nearly a full year before Nixon’s resignation – Democratic Rep. Robert Drinan introduced an impeachment resolution. He said it was triggered by the “recent revelation that President Nixon conducted a totally secret air war in Cambodia”.

As journalist Judith Coburn noted, “The secret

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bombing of Cambodia involved the same abuse of power and political manipulation of government agencies as Watergate, but only a few congressional representatives like John Conyers, Elizabeth Holtzman, and Edward Mezvinsky supported Drinan's Cambodia article, which was soundly defeated by the House impeachment committee 26-12."

Gerald Ford's "only honest answer" – acknowledging that an impeachable offence is only "whatever a majority of the House of Representatives considers it to be at a given moment in history" – foreshadowed the impeachment proceedings against Nixon, Clinton and Trump.

If what's impeachable is only what members of Congress say it is, constituents should insist that egregiously narrow definitions must no longer prevail. Other-

wise, the operative standard for presidents will continue to be what they can get away with – in tandem with a collectively feckless Congress.

For now, the presidential offenses that are routinely considered unimpeachable – and therefore ultimately acceptable – tell us a lot about Congress. And about US mass media. And maybe about ourselves. **CT**

*Norman Solomon is the national director of RootsAction.org and the author of many books including War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 and 2020 Democratic National Conventions. Solomon is the founder and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy.*

does not forget. That is one of the things that keeps it alive; but sometimes the past seems to matter too much."

It was the last couple of sentences that surprised me, coming from such a perceptive historian.

It reminded me of a question on a local BBC radio programme on January 3 2014, the day the Cabinet papers dealing with the miners' strike up to July 1984 were released: "Why are you bothered about all this? Move on, it all happened 30 years ago," I was asked.

There were so many injustices perpetrated during the epic 1984-5 struggle, so many brutal political decisions taken that affected, and continue to affect, the lives of tens of thousands of former miners, their families and communities, so many cover-ups, including what happened at Orgreave on June 18 1984, that the question should be reversed: "How can you not be bothered?"

Since the 18th century, the range of weapons used against British trade unionists have included transportation, police, troops, blacklists and use of blacklegs or "scabs."

One other sinister and covert weapon used against trade unionists is now getting some attention: the extent to which the police and security services have mounted surveillance and undercover operations against trade unionists and political activists since the 1960s.

The inquiry into undercover policing, set up in March 2015 by the then home secretary Theresa

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Granville Williams

## Caricaturing and smearing trade unions

In a thoughtful piece about trade unions, the journalist and historian Andy Beckett made the following observation after visiting exhibition stalls at a Trade Union Congress conference.

"Two were for campaigns about the victimisation of union members: the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, which

fights for recognition of the brutal treatment of miners by the police during the defeated strike of 1984-85; and the Shrewsbury 24 Campaign, 'seeking to overturn the unjust prosecution of 24 building workers who were charged following the first ever national building workers' strike in 1972.'

"The trade union movement

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May is now revealing how extensive this has been.

It is no surprise, therefore, that trade unionists who have been at the receiving end of all this don't forget; many carry the scars, both physical and mental, of being either the targets of truncheons or secret blacklists that denied them work.

Only rarely do we see investigative resources used by the broadcasting and print media to right miscarriages of justice – one thinks of Granada's *World in Action* on the Birmingham Six, or Yorkshire Television's *First Tuesday* with Grant McKee, and the media campaign to free the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven, convicted in connection with the bombing of pubs in Guildford and Woolwich in 1974.

Too often, sections of the media are complicit in sustaining falsehoods. Think about how, for over two decades after the Hillsborough disaster on April 15 1989, blame was attached to Liverpool supporters.

South Yorkshire Police disseminated a narrative that fitted every prejudice about drunken Liverpool supporters, violent and ticketless, causing mayhem and death.

The *Sun* carried these baseless lies on its infamous front-page headlined "THE TRUTH."

Twenty-three years later, the Hillsborough Independent Panel report of September 2012 finally refuted this web of lies. After a two-year hearing, the inquest jury gave its verdict, 27 years after the disaster, on April 26 2016.

The only way we seem get to the truth about miscarriages of justice is through the tenacity and tireless efforts of individuals and organisations who refuse to be deflected by official obfuscation or discouraged by the passage of time.

Trade unionists began campaigning to exonerate the unjustly convicted Shrewsbury 24 building workers after their trials in 1973-4, culminating in the founding of the Shrewsbury 24 Campaign in 2006.

The surviving pickets had their days in court again on January 24-25 this year at the Court of Appeal, where they applied for the convictions to be overturned.

The appeal court judges examined evidence compiled by the trade unionists during their long campaign, much of it unearthed due to the energy and determination of the campaign's researcher, Eileen Turnbull.

She discovered documents that shed light on a secretive government agency called the Information Research Department (IRD). One document shows that in 1973, the IRD gave a dossier about left-wing trade unionists to the makers of an ITV television programme.

This programme, made by *Anglia TV*, called *Red Under the Bed* and presented by Woodrow Wyatt, who would later become an ardent Thatcher supporter, was shown on ITV during the prosecution of six of the Shrewsbury pickets. The outcome of the Court of Appeal hearing is awaited.

These examples raise a wider

question: why have so much energy and resources been devoted to targeting trade unionists in undercover operations?

Indeed, on occasions this has bordered on paranoid obsession – witness the work of the Economic League and the Freedom Association, which compiled blacklists of trade union activists which were supplied, for free, to employers.

Hostility to the imagined threats of trade union power is widespread, but if you look beyond the version of history told by union-bashing journalists, Conservative politicians and popular historians, it is striking how contested and limited that power actually was and is.

Robert Taylor, the leading historian of modern trade unions who died in September, 2020, concluded the unions' hold over the British workplace from the 1940s to the 1970s was "always more illusory and less substantial than their many enemies liked to suggest".

Sections of the British media are complicit in creating this caricature of overweening trade union power.

Embedded in people's memories will be lurid newspaper headlines from the "Winter of Discontent" in January/February 1979. For most people it was a crisis experienced second-hand through the media, rather than directly.

Derek Jameson, then editor of the *Daily Express*, recalled: "We pulled every dirty trick in the book; we made it look like it was

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general, universal and eternal when in reality it was scattered, here and there, and no great problem”.

In fact, the crisis was nothing like as serious as the one Edward Heath had in 1974 with three-day weeks caused by restricted power supplies during the miners’ strike of that year.

In February 1979, the *Economist* pointed out in spite of tabloid newspapers headlines like the *Sun*’s predicting a “Famine Threat” only 200,000 people were laid off and supermarkets remained well stocked.

In spite of dire predictions, the only person who died was a picket under the wheels of a lorry.

A media myth about union power was created and utilised very effectively by Margaret Thatcher to win the May 1979

election campaign.

In government, legislation to curb trade unions was passed in October 1982.

Further laws, often misleadingly termed “Employment Acts”, followed in 1984, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990 and 1992.

One fact bears repeating. The gap between rich and poor was at its narrowest in the 1970s, a decade when trade unionism was its strongest.

In 2021 there is an obscene gap between those flaunting great wealth and working people battered by austerity, low pay, zero-hours contracts and now Covid-19.

So much for excessive trade union power. **CT**

*Granville Williams is editor of Media North, magazine of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom.*

and comfy virus-free flights.

Seats in Aero’s suede-walled jets sit six feet apart in single file.

“Hand-stitched Italian leather seats” aboard Aero’s “sleek black planes” combine with “sophisticated art lighting” to create a “renaissance of luxury travel”.

That “renaissance” is building from another direction as well. Brokers of used private jets have been enjoying a boom in sales ever since the pandemic began.

“Looking back we had a very good year and much, much better than expected”, Werner Slavik, chief banker for aviation at Societe Generale SA told a virtual Corporate Jet Investor conference earlier this month. “We saw, especially in the smaller jet market, quite strong demand”.

Bankers like Slavik cut deals for 2,598 used planes in the pandemic year of 2020.

“We have a lot of first-time buyers”, says Rebecca Johnson from the Kansas City-based aircraft sales broker JetHQ. “Covid has just seemed to drive most people over the edge”.

“You can’t go on vacation on Zoom”, explains Robert Gates, chief of international sales for Global Jet Capital Inc. “You need to get to your vacation house some way”.

Heaven forbid that those houses go vacant. In our staggeringly unequal world, people like Gates, Johnson, and Subramanian will always be there to make sure the rich – whatever the crisis of the moment may be – have what they

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*Sam Pizzigati*

## *The rich and those who serve them*

**W**e don’t know exactly why Uma Subramanian wanted to become an engineer. Did she believe her fascination with how things work could help make the world better place? We’ll never know for sure. What we do know: Subramanian, the aerospace engineer turned CEO of the luxury private-jet com-

pany Aero, now believes she has truly made humanity an awesome contribution.

“It just so happens that we might have built the perfect product for Covid,” Subramanian recently told Vice World News.

Her new company, founded by Uber founder Garrett Camp, has launched a luxury “semi-private jet” experience that offers safe

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want whenever they want it.

We've structured our society, in a sense, to serve the richest among us. This has happened before, at an even grander scale. At the height of America's original Gilded Age, the nation's richest had a veritable army of servants at their beck and call. January brought a glimpse at that history when the American Irish Historical Society put up for sale the mansion on New York's Fifth Avenue – right opposite Central Park – that has been its home since 1939.

This Beaux-Arts manse at 991 Fifth went up originally in 1901, one of the many lush fine homes on the avenue that belonged to the era's leading plutocratic families. The original owner of 991 Fifth – a widow who had inherited, in today's dollars, \$113-million – passed away in 1905, and her manse ended up as the property of the banker David Crawford Clark.

This new owner had plenty of help with his lavishly appointed dwelling. According to the 1910 Census, his urban mansion hosted eight live-in servants: one butler, five maids, and two cooks. All but one had emigrated to the United States earlier in the Gilded Age, between 1872 and 1906.

We don't know much about banker Clark's servant army. But we do know that rooms in his mansion had "call buttons" to summon servants at a moment's notice and a "back staircase, dark and cramped, that maids used to move quietly from floor to floor." Not for the servants'



Photo: Wikimedia

**991 Fifth Avenue: Now on sale for \$52-million.**

humble pleasure, apparently, the "intricate moldings, decorative glass, classical columns and large bay windows" of their employer's home.

The home at 991 Fifth Avenue would go on to have one more wealthy owner, a former president of Carnegie Steel who died in 1934. By then, the original Gilded Age had fizzled away into Great Depression, and the nation's immigrant millions no longer felt they had to accept those dark and cramped back staircases. Their families were fighting for real futures, demanding a much greater share of the wealth their labor was creating.

By 1939, after a decade of struggle that empowered America's workers and left the rich paying taxes at record rates, the luxurious mansions and estates of the Gilded Age rich had begun

evolving into embassies, cultural institutions, and multiple apartments. At 991 Fifth Avenue, the American Irish Historical Society would welcome the sons and daughters of the Gilded Age's Irish maids into the world's finest collection of materials celebrating the Irish-American experience.

Now that collection will be leaving Fifth Avenue. The American Irish Historical Society has put 991 Fifth on the market for \$52-million. The buyer, realtors expect, will almost certainly return the edifice to its private-residence origins.

Amid our contemporary new Gilded Age, we've in effect come full circle. The private palaces of the original Gilded Age, structures that shed their private-pleasure status in the much more equal America of the mid-20th century, are reverting back into private palaces. The rich rule. They expect the rest of us to serve them. Some of us will cook and clean. Some of us will get them – to their vacation homes – with a minimum of hassle in the middle of a pandemic.

But this era will not last forever. Our forbears ended the first Gilded Age. We can end the second. **CT**

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

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Photo: Thomas S. Harrington



Debris from the WWI Italian trenches near Asiago.

*Thomas S. Harrington*

## *Hysteria is a force that gives us meaning*

Sadly, for most people today, World War I, or what some older Brits still refer to as the Great War, doesn't mean too much. This is too bad as it is perhaps the best mirror we have on the behaviour of people and countries during the Covid era.

For those who have forgotten, WWI occurred at a time when technological advances enabled a quantum leap in man's ability to slaughter his fellow man. And, armed with these new killing powers, people proceeded to go out and do precisely that in absolutely staggering numbers, and on the most flimsy of

nationalist pretexts.

But, believe it or not, this heretofore unthinkable level of calculated murder is not even the most instructive element of this history for us today.

Rather, it is the fact that, at the time, most people not only bought into these flimsy pretexts, but that they did so with an astonishingly high degree of zeal and enthusiasm.

The butchers standing in the trenches sending wave after wave of innocent boys "over the top" – boys who could in many cases not even speak the official language of the country they were fighting for

– were consistently portrayed as wise men and heroes when they were as mad as the proverbial hatter.

Under the influence of what we can now see was the first great wave of mass propaganda, the young cannon fodder proudly marched off to war convinced they were doing something important and valuable for their families and communities, when in fact they were just being sacrificed like farm animals for the delusions of men in sitting in offices, wearing epaulets.

It was mass stupidity in a way humanity had never seen it . . . and embraced by nearly all on the home front out of the fear of not wanting to be ostracised by their neighbours.

And when it was over, and millions had perished, or been displaced and disfigured, none of the architects of this unprecedented human disaster was ever really held to account. For the most part, citizens continued to accept the notion that military wise men were, in fact wise, and that the government leaders who had whipped everyone up into a mortal frenzy were still basically worth listening to and following.

Though the remains of our Enlightenment mindset often inhibit us from thinking frankly along these lines, the fact is herd stupidity and group hysteria are among the most powerful and enduring human traits.

The big mistake of so-called rational thinking is consistently

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underestimating the power of people's need to believe in something transcendent of what they, at one point or another in their life, come to realise is their own individual insignificance.

Some fill this existential lack by building loving and creative relationships with those around them. But many others, struggling under the cruel burdens imposed by predatory consumer capitalism, find they are unable to do so. Instead, they seek to fill this spiritual gap with the self-interested myths of togetherness provided by the cynical elites and gaily

walk off the cliffs before them convinced that by doing so, they will finally bring an end to that empty feeling inside.

Or, to paraphrase the title of the wonderful book by Chris Hedges on the perverse attractions of war, *Hysteria is a Force that Gives us Meaning*. **CT**

*Thomas S. Harrington is a professor of Hispanic Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and the author of the recently published book, *Living la Vida Barroca: American Culture in a Time of Imperial Orthodoxies*.*

the goodies beyond his reach or pocket.

Waugh's early novels combined satire, farce and broad comedy in a witty and elegant manner. *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930) garnered critical praise and made him a celebrity, the darling of the Mayfair society he mocked in his books, yet to which he aspired. His characters were given such fatuous names as Lady Circumference, Mrs Ape, Mr and Mrs Outrage, and Lady Throbbing.

Yet Waugh unflinchingly hits his satirical targets: wickedly accurate and unsparingly vicious in his portrayal of the giddy young things of the Jazz Age. Not forgetting the gallery of battleship dowagers and crusty old buffers, the swindlers and charlatans and penniless hangers-on.

All this is very adroitly handled for such a young writer, and more to the point, very funny, which is a rare skill.

*A Handful of Dust* (1934) is Waugh in darker mode. The backdrop is still that of smart society – lavish parties at Lady Cockpurse's, chaps dining at Brats' club – but the novel (I think his best) presents a colder, far bleaker view of human nature. Any humour, when you can find it, is a deeper shade of black.

Tony Last, the hero, is an aristocrat steeped in tradition with rackety finances, lacking gusto and purpose. While he lives secluded in his grand but decaying house in the country, his wife, Lady

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Trevor Hoyle

## Oh, what a lovely Waugh!

British author Evelyn Waugh's first wife was also called Evelyn. To distinguish between the two they were known to their friends as He-Evelyn and She-Evelyn: a situation so ripe for muddle and farcical misunderstanding it might have come straight out of a Waugh novel – or put straight into one.

Born in 1903, Waugh was brought up in Hampstead, the affluent north London suburb, in a comfortably middle-class literary family. He read Modern History at Oxford, where he cheerfully admitted to doing very little except getting into scrapes whilst

drunk with his chums, Harold Acton and Cyril Connolly. This period was given a golden mythological gloss in the novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), which thirty-odd years later was turned into a hugely popular television series by Granada.

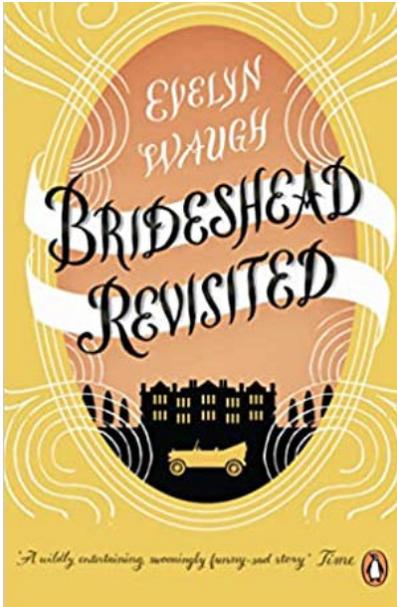
The reason for its success was the perfect recipe of ingredients the English public are in thrall to and endlessly fascinated by: snobbery, the class system, and envy of the decadent life-style of their aristocratic betters. As a common outsider himself, Waugh shared this fixation, much like a greedy schoolboy with his nose pressed to the sweetshop window, ogling

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Brenda, is drawn to the meaningless pursuit of amusement on the cocktail circuit. Her affair with John Beaver, a feckless, self-seeking wastrel, brings destruction to herself, her family, and not least her decent if dull husband. The scene where this pitiful creature confuses the name of her young son, also called John, with that of her lover, is truly shocking.

In the 1938 *Scoop*, Waugh is back on madcap form with a swinging, full-blooded satire on Fleet Street. It features the hapless and hilarious William Boot, a reclusive writer of a nature column (think greater crested newts mating in the misty dell and hollyhocks budding on the cusp of dawn) who by mistake gets sent to cover a foreign war. The ensuing chaos is a joy, fantastic fun. The refrain “Up to a point, Lord Copper” has entered the language, uttered by a groveling minion who never dares to say no or openly disagree with the tabloid proprietor of *The Beast*.

In 1930 Waugh became a Cath-



**BRIDESHEAD REVISITED:** Snobbery, the class system and envy of the decadent lifestyle of aristocratic betters ...

olic, and later served as an ageing army officer. His high church credo and wartime experiences were combined to magnificent effect in the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, published from 1952 to 1961. It follows Guy Crouchback – of aristocratic heritage, naturally – through the years of conflict, in

the course of which Guy’s faith and personal morality are put to the test on the field of battle and in his own tortured relationship with an unfaithful wife. No finer fictional testament of the Second World War and its emotional aftermath has appeared by any English writer.

Towards the end of his life (he was only 63 when he died) Waugh became a caricature of the curmudgeonly country squire, puffed up, ruddy-cheeked, fulminating in all directions. It was perhaps his finest creation; certainly no one but Waugh himself could have done a better job in fact or in fiction. **CT**

**Trevor Hoyle** is a writer and novelist based in Lancashire, England. His most recent novel is the environmental thriller *The Last Gasp*, published by Jo Fletcher Books (Quercus). He is currently preparing and making notes for a novel, *The Rock ‘n’ Roll Diaries: 56-58*. His website is [www.trevorhoyle.com](http://www.trevorhoyle.com)

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