

COLUMBIA POLITICAL REVIEW

A COLUMBIA POLITICAL UNION PUBLICATION

April 2009 | Volume VIII | Issue III

THE REVIEW ISSUE



Mama Voted for Obama

Why Daddy Is A Democrat

Help! Mom! There Are Liberals Under My Bed!

reading from left to right



Children's political literature,
parenting, and free will
by Nick Kelly

> Iraq's Antiques Roadshow

The past under siege in Iraq and the United States

by Lane Sell

> Toward a Starchitecture

Foundations for a political architecture built on dreams

by Aaron Hsieh

> It Is Written

Texte obamiste: the new American story at the Oscars

by Daniel D'Addario



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THE REVIEW ISSUE

APRIL 2009

With THE REVIEW, we take seriously not only the content of political arguments, but also how we make those arguments — how style might be, even must be, polemical.

What is this collusion between content and form? Daniel D'Addario suggests that at this year's Oscars, Americans celebrated bad politics as well as bad art (p. 5). Probing the recent history of antiquities in Iraq, Lane Sell asks what their fate means for nation-building in that country (p. 24). Aaron Hsieh wonders if Rem Koolhaas, the supremely political architect who designed the headquarters for China's state television network, is cool or boring (p. 20). And in our cover piece, Nick Kelly inspects the insidious polemics of "once upon a time": he reads political children's literature (p. 14).

We hope this month's articles show that reviews aren't just for movies and books — that "the review" could press on the mutual consequences of all kinds of arguments and forms. "The review" might help us read the world.



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It Is Written

Obama, the Oscars, and the new American dream

Daniel D'Addario

In his review of the Adam Sandler Mossad-hairdressing comedy *You Don't Mess With the Zohan*, David Denby declared "mutual acceptance is now the hip mode of humor" and called the film, like the *Harold and Kumar* movies, "un texte obamiste": an Obamaist text. It's unclear what, besides multicultural awareness, Obama and Sandler share. The *textes* are comic and meandering while the muse

The *Slumdog Millionaire* protagonist is a representation of how Obama exists in the popular imagination: an inertly flawless savior, bringing his novel personal experience to bear on every issue before the group dance sequence that we all know is coming in the end.

is anything but. This was in June 2008, the same month Barack Obama's primary campaign ended; premature to be declaring an Obama era, let alone the art that would define it. After Obama's triumph over Hillary Clinton, before the subterranean threats embodied by Sarah Palin's rhetoric and the knee-jerk mobilization of enraged liberal voters against her ticket, perhaps it seemed to Denby that this raucous subgenre—"profane, sloppily made, ethnically knowing, but good-hearted movies"—would become the new American cinema.

Denby wrote before it was clear what

then-Senator Obama would mean for politics or for art. The President has remained consistent, but his unforeseeably rapturous popular reception has changed the sorts of stories Hollywood will tell. Denby's examples do a worse job of depicting what 2008—the Year of Obama per *Time's* year-end issue and popular acclamation—was like than do films as well-produced and successful as Obama's campaign. Before the election and the Oscars, it might have been possible to claim a friendly unity as the national mood, rather than aggressive, deifying parochialism. Among the films successful with the Academy's industry professionals and with moviegoers, though, idle idolatry dressed up vaguely in hope won out.

Cinema is an effective lens through which to analyze political change. Films have always reflected their times, and Obama was the media celebrity throughout 2008 and into 2009. The annual *Vanity Fair* and *Entertainment Weekly* Oscar-season issues put Obama on their covers this year; a year prior, the *Vanity Fair* cover featured, among others, Anne Hathaway and Jessica Biel. This is not an incredibly logical shift, until one considers that Obama and the changes he has engendered play more like a movie than like historical events of consequence.

Oscar-ratified films like *Slumdog Millionaire* reflect that dissolution of political reality even further, surrounding their characters with meaningful tableaux but refusing to complicate either character or tableau with ideas. *Slumdog*, which won eight Oscars—including Best Picture, Director, and Adapted Screenplay—represents not a Denbian triumph in the depiction of ethnicity

on film, but a failure to even recognize political complexity. *Slumdog's* lead character, the blank Jamal (played by Dev Patel), wins the grand prize on the Indian *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* not by knowledge but unique elements of his personal history. Each question on the game show dovetails with an event in his life. The only worthwhile thing about him is the tide of history that carries him. In this way he is, nationality aside, the ideal obamiste protagonist.

Slumdog Millionaire depicts modern India but was produced by a British crew and is reinterpreted by American moviegoers as a reflection of national myth. Those stories taking place in America were all either too intellectually strenuous (*Milk*) or too obtuse (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*) to represent the American dream quite as well as did Jamal from Mumbai. *The Wrestler*, a brilliant allegory for America's fading place in the world, was largely lost amid the Oscar-season shuffle. The fact that the best-loved iteration of the traditional American dream onscreen in 2008 took place overseas either went unnoticed by moviegoers or allowed them to congratulate themselves on their new, facile understanding of India.

It is easy to get carried away by the romantic notion of a poor individual overcoming cinematic travails. However, this movie relies on a suspension of disbelief greater than that required to buy Adam Sandler as a wacky Mossad agent. In its presumption that personal history is a substitute for ability, *Slumdog Millionaire* is too cute by half: one is reminded of incantatory paeans such as "son of a Kenyan and a Kanan," recited by supporters to dispel the relative brevity of Obama's legislative career, as though accidents of birth were the same as accomplishments.

Jamal does next to nothing in *Slumdog*

Millionaire—bad things are done to him, and good things done for him. He is taken in by a band of orphans and this is fine; his brother alerts him to their caretaker's evil plan and helps him escape, and that is fine too. Eventually, he finds himself, by an almost Dickensian accident, on the *Millionaire* contestant hotline—of course, he didn't himself place the call. At the film's outset, a title card asks how Jamal ended up succeeding. The answer the film provides, "It is written," denies the notion that individuals have any agency, or grants the character's success as his birthright rather than his goal.

One is reminded of the website Barack Obama is Your New Bicycle, which lists off the ways in which the President "helped" the reader (e.g., "Barack Obama folded your laundry"). The site is facetious, but elucidates the American mindset as well as does *Slumdog Millionaire*'s success: American citizens intend Obama to be their million-dollar ticket. By being in the right place at the right time—that is, "Obama-era" America—they will triumph effortlessly. *Slumdog* evokes the archetypal nineteenth-century Horatio Alger stories, which encouraged young boys to make the most of luck and rise out of poverty, but those stories encouraged the cultivation of personal qualities. The 2008 equivalent said that all one needs is to be oneself. It's okay if that self doesn't have thoughts other than hope in a *deus ex machina* solution. After Jamal wins, his countrymen celebrate in the streets—he represents something to them, but there is no nuance in our understanding of why. Will his victory make a difference for them? Obama's election was a victory for demographic groups as specific as second-generation immigrants and as broad as the American population, but the electoral win alone was taken as the million-dollar grand prize. There is a harsh reckoning—the decisions Obama will have to make, the realization that Jamal's win changed no one's life but Jamal's—in individualistic, cinematic narratives.

No matter. Director Dan-

ny Boyle cannily cuts away from a dark moment—the death of Jamal's one family member—to *Slumdog*'s closing dance number. The death's dramatic impact is deleted; after all, winning, even in the most compromised and unbelievable circumstances, is cause for celebration! Scary things—from the death of a brother onscreen to war and recession on the news—aren't worth considering. As he dances, Jamal grins vacantly at the camera—it's as though the horrors in his past never happened. The wide-eyed stare holding not intelligence but a ceaseless, puppy-like wait for good news is the new American ideal. Voters in a country on the brink of economic collapse wait to hear what kind of dog Sasha and Malia Obama are getting.

An opportunity to tell a complicated story of modern-day India is forsaken in service of an amiable shell onto whom the audience projects its hopes. The *New York Times*' "Room to Debate" blog reported that the film was protested in India, for its title—seen as offensive to actual slumdweller—and for its narrative and shot setup (the screenplay and cinematography that the Oscars named the year's best). "[T]he rags-to-riches romance has been called 'poverty porn' for the way it casts a glowing light on a very poor section of Mumbai society and promotes 'slum tourism.'"

Writing on the same *Times* post, Sadia Shepard noted that screenwriter Simon Beaufoy's "use of the word 'dog' was a problematic choice he made arbitrarily, and clearly without doing enough research." She reports that Boyle's film

has been integrated into debates over whether or not to demolish the Dharavi slum, an effort to "put India's best foot forward" in the wake of the movie's success. It is easy to allow cinema to color our perceptions, which is why a film so heavy on referents (Shepard notes the totemic use of the Taj

Majal and Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan) but so light on information is dangerous. Americans cooed at the sight of the *Slumdog* child actors on the Oscar red carpet. MSNBC quoted one young ac-

tress: "My friends are saying, 'your fate is so good'"; those same child actors were back in the Mumbai slums by midweek, and one was reportedly beaten by his father after the Oscars. But popular attention had moved on.

It would be easy to call Jamal an Obama figure, but the politician himself has broad personal ambition (that he has sought to downplay) and a keen, remarkable intellect. Rather, the *Slumdog Millionaire* protagonist is a representation of how Obama exists in the popular imagination: an inertly flawless savior, bringing his novel personal experience to bear on every issue before the group dance sequence that we all know is coming in the end, whatever horrors happen in the interim. *Slumdog Millionaire* is un *vrai* texte obamiste. Its vision is less in line with Denby's "good-heartedness" and more in line with Obama's pre-election trip to Europe: a new setting for generic boilerplate, which condescends both to the foreign land used as window dressing and to the American citizens wooed by exotica.

If *Slumdog Millionaire*'s Best Picture Oscar—the same prize won by such non-classics as *Gladiator*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Dances With Wolves*—seems insignificant, consider that a film which was nearly released direct-to-video has instead grossed over \$115 million and counting, with high DVD sales assured. (Of course, the box office has been by and large booming in this escapist year.) The Oscar win not only declares *Slumdog*'s underpinning philosophy the order of the day in Hollywood; it also broadly disseminates that philosophy.

In recent years, Oscar Best Pictures had presented individualistic protagonists: *American Beauty*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *Million Dollar Baby*, for instance, had characters who made decisions and challenged their circumstances in order to obtain self-defined success. Swank's Maggie Fitzgerald, for instance, becomes a celebrated boxer through her commitment to training. She has to overcome rather than exploit humble circumstances. These somewhat artless films express a reliance on the individual's abilities and mental toughness rather than the inborn hauteur of "destiny." *Million Dollar Baby*, if you change boxing for the political sphere, plays like a biography of Hillary Clinton; both Hil[ar]ies even get euthanized in the end.

Had 2008 been the year of Hillary Clinton rather than Barack Obama, perhaps a film about a striver owing his or her rise to a tireless work ethic—like *Milk*, which depicts ceaseless losing campaigns before Harvey



Cassie Spodak

Milk's mid-film political triumph—might have won out at the Oscars. *Milk* never had a shot, though; *Slumdog Millionaire* was forecast to win from early on, just as the persona of Hillary Clinton couldn't hold up

ing born as an old man and dying a fresh-faced youth. The fatal flaw of Benjamin Button is that literally nothing else about its protagonist is interesting. "You never know what's coming for you," Benjamin's mother

than *Slumdog Millionaire*, were even considered front-runners for a Best Picture nomination, and won major prizes. They even overshadowed *You Don't Mess With the Zohan*. In *Wall-E*, humanity has shipped

Obama's election was a victory for demographic groups as specific as second-generation immigrants and as broad as the American population, but the electoral win alone was taken as the million-dollar grand prize.

against the more appealing one of Barack Obama. The Oscars, after all, are something of a crystal ball into national mood: *Gandhi* and *Out of Africa* in the operatic, symbolist Reagan 1980s; *Forrest Gump* in the previous great wave of "hope" that was Bill Clinton's first term and *American Beauty* in the deflated irony of his second, *A Beautiful Mind* and *Million Dollar Baby* in the Randian "compassionate conservatism" of Bush's first term; *The Departed* and *No Country for Old Men* in Hollywood's dark night of the soul that was Bush's second term. 2007 was especially dark, and not just due to *Juno*—the dark insights into American society of the anti-Western *No Country for Old Men* and the capitalism-vs.-religion saga *There Will Be Blood* were absent in 2008. What a difference a year makes! With the election of a President whose public image, despite his worthiness, seems pinned to the notion of luck and timing rather than the traditional *Million Dollar* Clinton narrative, it's easy to imagine that we'll see many more films whose protagonists are acted upon, films with easy happy endings.

Other Best Picture nominees were hardly less simplistic than *Slumdog*: *Frost/Nixon* congratulates its audience on being smart enough to know that Richard Nixon was bad. The message is not that far off from the penumbra emitted from but not necessarily by Obama (see his pre-Inauguration concert, at which Hollywood stars sang his praises while he sat smiling blithely): that the audience, or voter, is intelligent for having voted for the right candidate or seen the right film, and that he or she is clearly beyond manipulation. Then the simplistic story—"it is written," Barack Obama is your new bicycle—continues.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button earned the most money and greatest number of nominations of the five films, and it certainly has a good hook. As played by the fortysomething *tabula rasa* Brad Pitt, Benjamin Button is a man of interesting health: he is doomed to age backwards, be-

ing born as an old man and dying a fresh-faced youth. The fatal flaw of Benjamin Button is that literally nothing else about its protagonist is interesting. "You never know what's coming for you," Benjamin's mother

instructs him—a "life's like a box of chocolates" obamiste, perhaps, though even Forrest Gump wanted to engage with others and his nation. Long stretches of Benjamin's life—and the viewer's—pass without incident or meaning. If there is anything worth knowing from an American life lived backwards over the course of the twentieth century, Benjamin avoids learning it; "what's coming" for him as he grows younger is a series of period outfits and a mind as untroubled by thought as his face is newly unwrinkled. His regression into youth signals little more than the notion that an externally-determined life spent avoiding contact with ideas is not a life wasted—in fact, is perhaps the American ideal. The film begins at the end of World War I and ends during Hurricane Katrina, but neither event has scope—one a bunch of celebrating citizens, the other a few rattling windows. Benjamin lives in the same nice universe as Jamal; he may never know what's coming for him, but, freed from the constraints of responsibility and context, he'll always land on his feet.

Between *Button*'s Benjamin, *Slumdog*'s Jamal, and Kate Winslet's Hanna—*The Reader*'s S.S. guard whom the audience is expected to absolve once she becomes, you know, a reader—characters gliding above the political import surrounding them dominated this year's Oscar ceremony. Viewers gave the Oscar show good ratings, now that the partisan Jon Stewart has been replaced as host by song-and-dance-y Hugh Jackman, and they turned out to see *Benjamin Button* and *Slumdog Millionaire* in droves. (The Reader, too, has found unexpected momentum in Winslet's Best Actress trophy.) Perhaps they see themselves, framed by picturesque political change that makes a good plot twist but that they hope cannot affect them, as Benjamins and Jamals.

Popular cinema got in on the game too. *Wall-E* and *The Dark Knight*, two summer blockbusters more widely attended even

itself to the outer reaches of space after destroying Earth—they have evolved into entertainment-obsessed slobs, controlled by an omniscient computer system about which they neither know nor care. They merely trust it.

In *The Dark Knight*, Batman and the Joker battle over the fate of Gotham City, but the Gothamites themselves are believed to be complicit in their own destruction. The director, Christopher Nolan, sets two Nietzschean figures at play to take charge of the lives of those who cannot or will not aid themselves—the very people who allowed Gotham City to slide into ruin. The Gothamites need a protector because they are lazy, shiftless, weak. I looked around my theater to see if anyone else was offended at the film's close, but everyone else was rapt, in communion with the screen. *The Dark Knight* became America's second-highest-grossing film of all time.

These films are not "good-hearted," nor are they heartening. But judging from the slate of films at the first Obama-era Oscars, and the discourse—restricted primarily to who loves Obama most—on this campus and throughout America, they represent a cultural shift. One wonders if, as presidencies tend to fade in popularity over time, disillusionment with Obama will produce an Obamaist *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*. One hardly hopes for the American situation to worsen, but perhaps more critical thinking on the part of audiences, filmmakers, and Oscar voters is called for. Euphoria over Barack Obama's election has not only conditioned us to wait for a happy ending that may long be deferred, but has elevated to the American pantheon truly bad art.

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> Dismal Indeed

The new economics—and how it can destroy America

Thomas Friedman is making us stupid.

Columns by Friedman—a guy with no actual economics expertise (his degrees are in Mediterranean and Middle East studies)—run alongside those by Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman in the *New York Times*, America's newspaper of record. But while Krugman's corpus includes academic articles with titles like "Scale economies, product differentiation, and the pattern of trade," Friedman apparently conducts research by flying to "exotic" countries, eating lunch with businessmen, and expressing wonderment at the omnipresence of advertisements for cell phones and fast food restaurants. Yes, Tom, they have Pizza Hut in India too. The juxtaposition on the page seems a bit odd: the sage dispenses sharp insights and canny criticism, while the mountebank, a few column inches over, trundles along rehashing tired themes with new window dressing.

Yet Mr. Friedman—easy as it is to single him out for his preposterous pronouncements and puréed metaphors—is just the particularly heinous exemplar of an insidious trend. A horde of self-proclaimed non-experts, and some academics as well, have popularized economics, casting doubt and caution aside as relics of Carlyle's dismal science. Amazon.com now has an entire section devoted to "pop economics," including Stephen Levitt and Stephen Dubner's famous *Freakonomics* and a host of copycats—books like *The Undercover Economist: Exposing why the Rich are Rich, the Poor are Poor, and Why You Can Never Buy a Decent Used Car!* or *Hidden Order: The Economics of Everyday Life*, or even, *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*.

Meanwhile, TV hosts like CNN's Lou Dobbs or CNBC's inimitable Jim Cramer purport to analyze pressing issues. Dobbs's frequent rants on immigration and global warming—the former an invasion, the latter a hoax, both threatening truth, justice, and the American way—seem preposterous but, according to Nielsen ratings, around a million viewers tune in nightly to soak up his wisdom. Cramer, on the other hand, has become popular for his investment advice and financial analysis, dispensed in the reassuring manner of a spastic orangutan. On March 11, 2008, for instance, he advised viewers that "Bear Stearns

is not in trouble." The next week, the bank collapsed. Smashing things with a hammer—as Cramer is wont to do—is not a sign of accuracy or prophetic ability.

The aim of the exercise—to make a dreary topic entertaining and relevant to the common man—seems innocuous enough, and if done properly it is indeed a worthy task. But all too often economics is not fun, anecdotes are not representative, problems are complex, and these commentators do their readers a disservice by suggesting that things are otherwise. A little knowledge, the cliché goes, is a dangerous thing; by skimming the surface of topics like finance or immigration when the audience has little knowledge of the underlying principles, they spurn caution in search of a quick buck.

The counterargument is that this popularization profits society by introducing economic concepts and a critical mode of thinking to the common man. It is a nice theory, but one that does not really hold up.

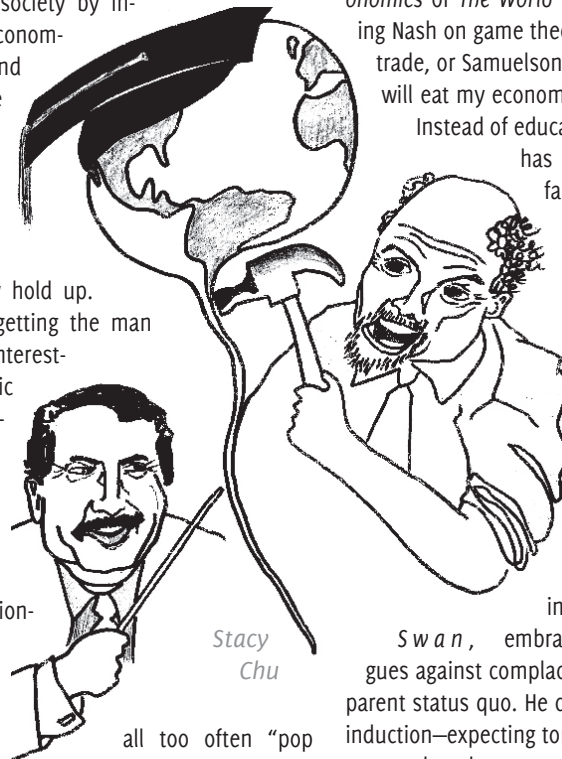
It is not that getting the man on the street interested in economic issues is inherently bad. To the contrary: if more people thought economically about national issues, we would all be much better off. Yet economics reinforces, all too often "pop replaces, rather than more authoritative studies. *The World is Flat*, Friedman's breathy paean to globalization, has sold over two million copies in several editions, more than Joseph Stiglitz's twin tomes *Globalization and its Discontents* and

Making Globalization Work, and Jagdish Bhagwati's *In Defense of Globalization* combined.

Instead of getting primed on debates over the uneven distribution of gains from globalization, readers of Friedman receive lectures on the unbri-dled joys of the "Wal-Mart Symphony,"—a Cantata in Supply-Chain Efficiency Minor—and the somewhat un-rigorous "Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention," the aphorism that "No two countries that are both part of a major supply chain, like Dell's, will ever fight a war against each other..." It is this kind of radical oversimplification that makes Friedman so popular—his theories seem childish and his evidence is purely anecdotal, but they *feel* like they're true. If there were some evidence to suggest readers really were moving up from pop to crunch, excessive "cool" appeal might be forgivable. But if more than a fraction of *Freakonomics* or *The World is Flat* readers are perusing Nash on game theory, Ohlin on international trade, or Samuelson on possibility functions, I will eat my economics textbook.

Instead of educating the public, this trend has created an impression of false knowledge; instead of teaching us how little we know, "pop economics" feeds us tidbits of "fact" that buttress us against those thinkers who actually seek to convey meaning, rather than to entertain. Some authors, on the other hand, have avoided the easy trap of trivia; Nassim Nicholas Taleb, in his 2007 book *The Black*

Swan, embraces uncertainty and argues against complacent acceptance of the apparent status quo. He contends that all too often induction—expecting tomorrow to be the same as every other day—gets us into trouble, especially in finance, where all too often analysis consists of extending an upward-trending line into the future. Just because a firm has been profitable for a few years does *not* mean it will continue to be; the world does not operate according to con-



by Ian Crone

with apologies to Matt Taibbi

venient Gaussian distributions or elegant models with clean, simple assumptions. Unlike typical pop economists, Taleb maintains respect for the complexity of the problems he addresses.

Now, to be fair, Jim Cramer did run a successful hedge fund, and Stephen Levitt is a renowned economist, and Lou Dobbs really does have an economics degree. It's not that one needs to be an academic to dispense econom-

pert whose argument reeks of restraints and nuance often doesn't get much attention. An expert must be bold if he hopes to alchemize his homespun theory into conventional wisdom." It's pitiful that authors who embrace uncertainty and rebuke economic hubris must struggle to make their voices heard over the general din; *Freakonomics* isn't helping. I'll confess to having enjoyed much of the book, and others of its ilk—

to read whole books when one can get everything with a Google search? If treated correctly, Wikipedia becomes an invaluable tool for spreading knowledge and spurring further study. But we sometimes treat it as an omniscient cybernetic deity, skipping the oft-excellent bibliographies listed in footnotes and skimming the content for facts, rather than understanding.

It's the obsession with factoids—or perhaps

All too often “pop economics” replaces, rather than reinforces, more authoritative studies.

ic wisdom—Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner isn't formally trained—or that those who criticize academic thought are destroying discourse—Taleb takes great issue with economic “experts” whose financial models bear no relation to reality, going so far as to label the models of Markowitz and Sharpe, Nobel winners, as “hot air” and “quack remedies.” There's a difference between those, like Dobbs and Friedman, who revel in their everyman status and bite their thumbs at expertise *as such*, and those like Levitt who, though experts themselves, devalue expertise in an attempt to reach a wider audience.

The problem with *Freakonomics*—chock full of fascinating factoids as it is—is that it's almost too successful. The book, which peaked at #2 on the *New York Times* bestseller list, does away with much of the traditional tedium of economics research—endless modeling and revisions of models—in favor of snappy, easily digestible bites of fact (how real estate agents are like Ku Klux Klansmen, for example). Stephen Dubner, journalist, and Stephen Levitt, economist behind the magic, reduce human decision-making processes to pure rational choice mechanisms wherein we maximize gain and minimize loss (both as calculated by the authors). If their data doesn't always add up perfectly, as was revealed regarding their chapter on ties between abortion and falling crime rates... well, who cares, because it's the *principle* that matters. Don't trust those crusty old economists with their tomes of *numbers*—they're *boring* and *old*, and did we mention *boring*. *Freakonomics* itself describes this phenomenon; Levitt and Dubner note that “an ex-

but I won't confuse it with real social science research.

The essential problem, then, is not any particular pop economist, or even the existence of the genre, but the effects that these pundits have on public discourse. Simultaneously, as the *Freakonomics* genre elevates the plebeian reader to the stature of erudite economist (as though possession of isolated facts were sufficient to decrypt the secrets of the dismal science and then debate public policy), the Friedmans and Dobbses reduce the value of actual expertise by shrinking complex questions down to sketches and sermons. Friedman's blithe confidence in America (“the world's dream machine”), globalization, and the inevitability of a green revolution (his newest book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America*, might as well be titled *Lots, Of, The Same: Why Thomas Friedman Needs a New House—and How He'll Reprint His Columns in a Book*) mirrors Dobbs's paranoid ravings about illegal immigrants (whom he associates with “communists, socialists, and even anarchists”) in that they feel qualified to dismiss the advice of scholars with years of experience based on mere surface scans of cavernous topics.

What we're really talking about is devaluation of expertise, and of subtlety and complexity, in keeping with an all-too-familiar American tradition: anti-intellectualism. It happens in history, economics, and science alike. Call it the Wikipedia effect—I'm sure Thomas Friedman would love it. On Wikipedia, saying something, anything, can make it so, no qualifications required. Who needs

with truthiness, to borrow from the modern *philosophe* Colbert—that's the real symptom. What we want isn't actually discourse, but pre-packaged arguments, whether on globalization or education or taxes, primed to unleash on our foes without regard for intricacy or skepticism. Economics isn't an exact science; very rarely, if at all, does it possess *any* absolute truths. The blithe supposition that it does, that one can speak of “globalization” or “immigration” or even “human beings” as though such convenient constructs could be meaningfully analyzed at the highest levels of abstraction and their behaviors and effects predicted with flawless precision, is a useless and damaging misconception. Reading *just* Friedman, or listening to *just* Dobbs, or believing, as Dubner and Levitt seem to, that human action is *purely* rational and predictable, misses the point entirely. Social science is hardly exact—but like “real” science, it depends completely on slow, measured, data-driven debate and falsification of hypotheses. Nassim Nicholas Taleb manages to be entertaining—cautioning against the “Thanksgiving Turkey” fallacy—and careful at the same time. It's not easy to balance broad appeal against useful (read: subtle) analysis—but it's time to tilt those scales back towards sanity.

Oh, and one more thing. If the world is already *flat*, how can it be getting *flatter*?

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Of Particles and Politics

Finding science's "rightful" place in American life

J. Bryan Lowder

Science has had a rough eight years." The speaker was Dr. Leon Lederman, Nobel Laureate in physics and outspoken advocate of science education; the topic was the state of American science on the cusp of the Obama presidency. Outside, the air was cold and (uncharacteristically) still. Lederman's audience inside Chicago's Stetson Conference Center, though, buzzed with an energy unknown to America's scientific community since the turn of the millennium.

The scientists, policymakers, journalists, and other science fans at the annual meeting of the the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)—which works to promote progressive science policy and education in the United States—were energized by Lederman's speech. But like the speaker himself, they were more excited about another, earlier talk: Obama's inaugural address.

On the day he became president, Barack Obama gave real attention—and respect—to science, in the form of eight simple, magic words: "We will restore science to its rightful place." For scientists, this declaration had the feeling of a parent welcoming home an estranged child, and telling that child that she had been

right all along. Frank Press, former president of the National Academy of Sciences, captured the mood in a *New York Times* article the day after the inauguration. "If you look at the science world, you see a lot of happy faces... [Obama recognizes] what science can do to bring this country back in an innovative way," he enthused.

The words "rightful" and "back" recognize that US has long been a major player in global scientific research. Yet Obama

and Press' statements mask a complex problem: what exactly is science's rightful place in American society? Obama appreciates that science already plays a certain role, yet the question of how that role should be defined and by what methods and criteria it will be measured remains murky. Science, yes; but what kind and how much?

GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE POLITICIZATION OF SCIENCE

Scientists were not the only ones struck by Obama's pro-science rhetoric. Even Dan Savage, the celebrated sex advice columnist, commented on the statement in his *Savage Love* podcast, wryly observing that when the new President delivered his speech, "Bush shot faith-based daggers at the back of his head." Savage, Lederman and, indeed, Obama allude to a certain mistreatment of science in the recent past—and connect this abuse to the policies and outlook of the Bush administration.

In early 2004, an ad-hoc association of 64 top US scientists, including 20 Nobel laureates and sev-

eral science advisers to past administrations (some Republican), published an open letter to President Bush decrying the administration's manipulation of science for po-

litical ends. In the report, the authors, including Lederman, accused the administration of "suppressing, distorting or manipulating the work done by scientists at federal agencies," and outlined a number of egregious cases, including the censorship of global warming research by the Environmental Protection Agency and the replacement of Center for Disease Control publications on proper condom use with a simple warning emphasizing condom failure rates.

The most serious offense was Bush's push to politicize the scientific process itself. According to the report, the administration instituted a "political litmus test" for scientific advisory boards, often eschewing the opinions of public or university-affiliated scientists in favor of those associated with stakeholding companies. The piece also attacked the administration's restriction of federal funding for certain research projects—most notably stem cells and climate change—to which it objected on ethical or political grounds.

It's easy to see why the scientific community might have felt persecuted during the Bush years. In his last State of the Union address, for instance, Bush said, "we must... ensure that all life is treated with the dignity it deserves," calling on Congress to "pass legislation that bans unethical practices such as the buying, selling, patenting, or cloning of human life." This tendency to deploy science for a political agenda frustrated a field that prides itself on producing knowledge through empirical observation, experiment, and proof. From the perspective of scientists, the last eight years were a period of fear and stagnation—a kind of Inquisition. Obama's election, then, may signal a new Renaissance.

"YES WE CAN"... CAN'T WE?

Now that Bush is out, the mood of the scientific community seems generally hopeful, at least with regard to the new President's attitude toward science. Obama has made it clear that he supports stem cell research, actually believes in global warming, and wants to keep intelligent design from being taught in America's classrooms. These positions, in addition to the much-touted inaugural statement, have cast Obama as science's champion. But the question is not whether the new administration will back science generally and abstractly, but which specific research projects the federal government will choose to support.

Hot topics like health care, sustainable energy and climate change make the priority list, while a large swath of the "basic" research sciences, like particle physics and

In his Inaugural Address, President Obama gave real attention—and respect—to science, in the form of eight simple, magic words: "We will restore science to its rightful place."

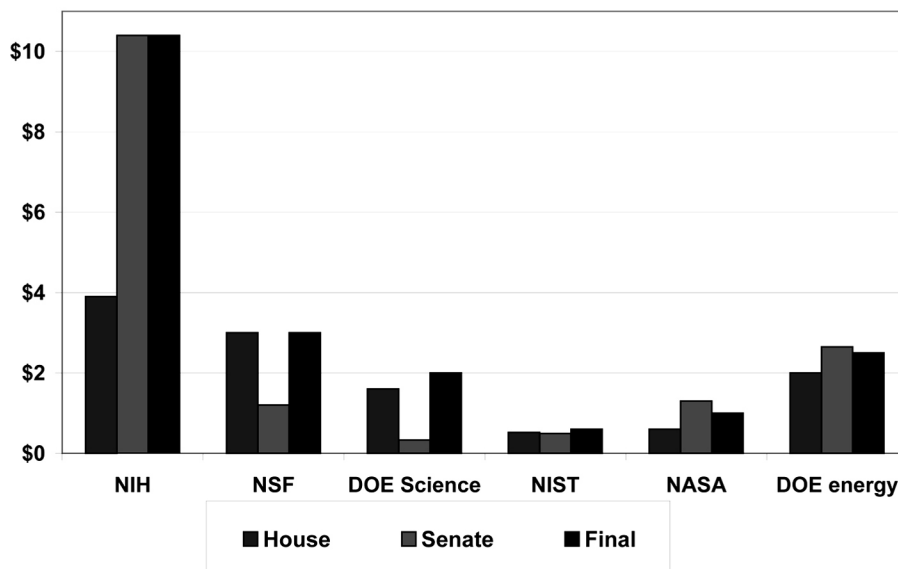
chemistry, is excluded. Basic research, simply put, is the kind of science that may not have obvious practical applications when first initiated. As such, it often has a more difficult time making a case for its existence than its more readily applicable cousins.

The breakdown of the stimulus bill passed by Congress in February reflects this focus. In the \$790 billion package, \$21.5 billion is earmarked for federal research and development. According to an AAAS analysis of the package, the National Institute of Health is the biggest winner, receiving \$10.4 billion, while the Department of Energy's Office of Science (the governmental agency that oversees research in basic fields like high energy physics) received \$1.6 billion. The DOE's energy research programs, however, which include areas like biofuel and renewable energy, were allotted \$2.5 billion. These allocations work in conjunction with regular federal appropriation figures: NIH's total FY09 budget is \$39.9 billion, while DOE OS's is about \$6 billion.

Basic research, while certainly on track to attracting more support than it did under Bush, will take a backseat to admittedly more practical health and energy research. How will this choice impact science in the United States in the coming years? According to a 2009 report by the nonpartisan Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, the United States ranks sixth among 40 countries and regions in terms of national competitiveness in the sciences, with Singapore, Sweden and Luxembourg taking the first three slots. Sixth place is not terrible; what is frightening, however, is that in terms of growth over the past decade, the US places last after countries like Malta (24th), Cyprus (9th), and, in first place, China.

Predicting a decline in US domination of technology and sciences has been popular for years now. As the global economy settles into a recession, politicians must make even tougher decisions when it comes to distributing funds. America may feel that it can put basic research (at least outside of energy) on life support for the moment, but that

2009 Supplemental Recovery Funding for R&D
(House, Senate, and Final bills)
(budget authority in billions of dollars)



Source: AAAS analysis of R&D in House, Senate, and Final stimulus appropriations bills (HR 1).
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does not mean that the rest of the world will follow suit. As the study indicates, China has steadily increased its funding for basic research over the past 10 years and, according to the R&D Global Funding Forecast from Battelle, China will increase gross domestic research funding (both governmental and private) by 16 percent (\$20 billion) this year, far outstripping the United States' \$6.6 billion increase. Meanwhile, the EU has set aside around 50 billion for basic research over the next few years. The recession, it seems, has not dampened the world's commitment to scientific research; if anything, other countries are vying to fill the void left by the US.

As this international contest proves, research done within American borders is only part of a much greater global project, and what happens—or does not happen—in the US depends on other countries' research trajectories. Science is an undeniably global game.

TOP QUARKS, TAX DOLLARS, AND THE TERAGRID

In the 1996 film *Contact*, Dr. Ellen Arroway, played by Jodi Foster, discovers just how borderless and political science can be. When she discovers a signal of extraterrestrial intelligent life, science collides with international politics on a massive scale.

On the most basic level, labs from around the world were needed to confirm and track

Dr. Arroway's signal. For real-life scientists, working collaboratively is a daily—and necessary—situation.

The Collider Detector at Fermilab (CDF) experiment at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory just outside Chicago, for instance, comprises over 600 scientists from 14 countries and three continents. It took all these professionals working together to discover the top quark, one of the fundamental particles of nature, in 1994. In more current news, the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Geneva, Switzerland will be the site of collaborations for *thousands* of physicists in the coming years as they search for the so-called Higgs boson particle.

The point here is that science, and particularly science that requires big machines (the \$6.4 billion LHC is a whopping 17 miles in circumference) and many people, is necessarily international. And as a common physicists' joke points out, "Scientists go where the action is." They move to whichever institution or country best supports their research at the time. This would be fine except for one detail: the majority of scientific funding flows from the national governments, and politicians may not hold such cosmopolitan, transnational views.

Most scientists depend on the federal government to finance large projects like particle accelerators. Indeed, national governments are the only entities with the re-



sources necessary to facilitate this kind of science. However, current economic conditions make billion-dollar checks for finding invisible particles a little harder to come by. It seems that even politicians are being forced to embrace a sort of post-nationalist view of science.

At an AAAS panel discussion, comments from European delegates seemed to suggest, further, that the age of global scientific competitiveness (typified in the 1960s “space race” between the US and the Soviet Union) is over. José Silva-Rodriguez, Director-General of the General Research European Commission, spoke about cooperation as one of the measures that must be taken to prevent science from damage by the global economic recession.

“The current economic crisis does not provide an excuse for reducing research,” Silva-Rodriguez declared. “Fortunately, the US seems to be more committed to international science and technology cooperation. Protectionism will only take us into a deeper recession.” Silva-Rodriguez went on to argue that basic research, like particle physics, *must* be done through international collaboration: “We shouldn’t be duplicating research tools.

We should be sharing the burden.”

After another session, I asked Dr. Arden L. Bement, Jr., Director of the National Science Foundation, how he convinces American politicians of the importance of international collaboration. “I like to think of science as a kind of diplomacy,” he said. “Scientists can penetrate the political issues of the past to do important work. In the current economic situation, it is in the interest of nations to leverage resources across political borders.”

Using science as a tool of statecraft is a striking idea, but Bement also recognized the practicality of shar-

ing the burden: “My favorite example [of transnational cooperation] is a cyber-computing infrastructure, like the Teragrid [a global network of supercomputing centers linked to process large amounts of data]. It saves money.”

Despite the post-nationalist rhetoric, we should consider the effects of leaving basic research to other countries. Certainly, the science would still be done, but what about American jobs, education and, more abstractly, the country’s reputation as a global leader of innovation? The great “brain circulation” (the politically corrected version of “brain drain”) has already begun, but scientists don’t seem to be circulating back. According to industry statistics, there are currently not enough accelerator scientists to meet US needs because so many are going abroad.

This is almost certainly due in large part to the Bush administration’s stifling policies, as well as recent funding cuts in the particle physics community. The development on the proposed next-generation International Linear Collider suffered an effective freeze, and US physics labs laid off a portion of their

staffs well before the economic downturn. James Rosenzweig, a UCLA physicist, feels this anxiety in his own research. “If you look at who I’m collaborating with, it’s guys in Munich [instead of in the US]...We need to be paying attention.”

EINSTEIN IN ALASKA, OR, A TRAIN RIDE WITH AMERICA

What if we still want to do some science here?

This is where the question becomes cultural. Back at the press breakfast, Dr. Lederman discussed the implications of Obama’s stimulus bill.

“Essential activities will have enough funding for two years. In the long run, however, we’re going to have to get ‘Joe Six-pack’ to care about science.”

Lederman strikes at something fundamental by invoking archetypal American citizen Joe Six-pack, so often valorized by defunct Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. In Palin’s rhetoric, Joe was a simpleminded, hardworking, patriot who only cared about politics and policy insofar as they allowed him to live his life in the way he saw fit. He could care less about the Higgs boson or the Teragrid, but he does care about where his tax dollars are spent.

Lederman suggests that if we really want to get science back on track in America, we have to find a way to make it relevant to every American, not just the intellectual elite. Obama’s bias toward healthcare and energy acknowledges this issue. Every American understands that her kids need medicine and her car needs gas, so emphasizing these areas in the stimulus bill is a politically savvy move.

And of course, it’s not as if medicine and fuel aren’t important—they certainly are. What worries scientists uninvolved in those fields is that, while their areas of expertise elude the national focus, America could lose its ability to compete, or even to contribute, in those fields. This intellectual atrophy could be disgraceful for a country that has been at the forefront of science for so many decades. Reputation aside, losing track of the broader questions of science places the US at a practical disadvantage for the future.

Many economists see “knowledge economies” as the next stage in development for wealthy nations. In this system, information is commoditized in such a way that it, rather than goods or services (the management of which is highly automated anyway), drives the economy. Director General Silva-Rodriguez zealously made this argument. He in-

sisted, "It's smart to move economies to a knowledge and technology base. Investing in these areas fights unemployment by creating jobs."

I would add that this investment also just makes the country a better place to live as it involves more people in the production and circulation of knowledge. But this type of

ter the discovery, or materialize only as unexpected results. The web, for instance, was invented at CERN in 1992 as a tool for sharing physics research; now it is practically essential to daily life. Obama has said that he tries to think beyond election cycles, but most politicians are more interested in the immediate future. Science, at least in its time scale, just

education. More fundamentally, Americans need to be excited about science again. The quest for scientific truth—not just for better pills or cleaner cars—is something that we should rally around, especially in tough economic times. Scientists have a tendency to keep to themselves, discussing their amazing work in closed conferences like the one

Basic research, while certainly on track to getting more support than it did under Bush, will take a backseat to admittedly more practical health and energy research.

economic change would demand a more fundamental cultural change: after eight years of simplicity, Joe Six-pack must embrace an undeniably complex intellectualism in which science plays a vital part.

I'll end with a story.

A few summers ago, I interned as a science writer at Fermilab, which gave me occasional chances to travel into Chicago by train. On the return trip from one of those visits, a drunken man in the aisle across from my group asked us who we were. "Fermilab interns," we replied. He thought for a moment, and then yelled, "E = mc fuck you!" followed by hysterical laughter.

I worry that many Americans share his attitude. Science, as an intellectual pursuit, is difficult to understand; research benefits often do not "trickle down" until decades af-

ter the discovery, or materialize only as unexpected results. The web, for instance, was invented at CERN in 1992 as a tool for sharing physics research; now it is practically essential to daily life. Obama has said that he tries to think beyond election cycles, but most politicians are more interested in the immediate future. Science, at least in its time scale, just

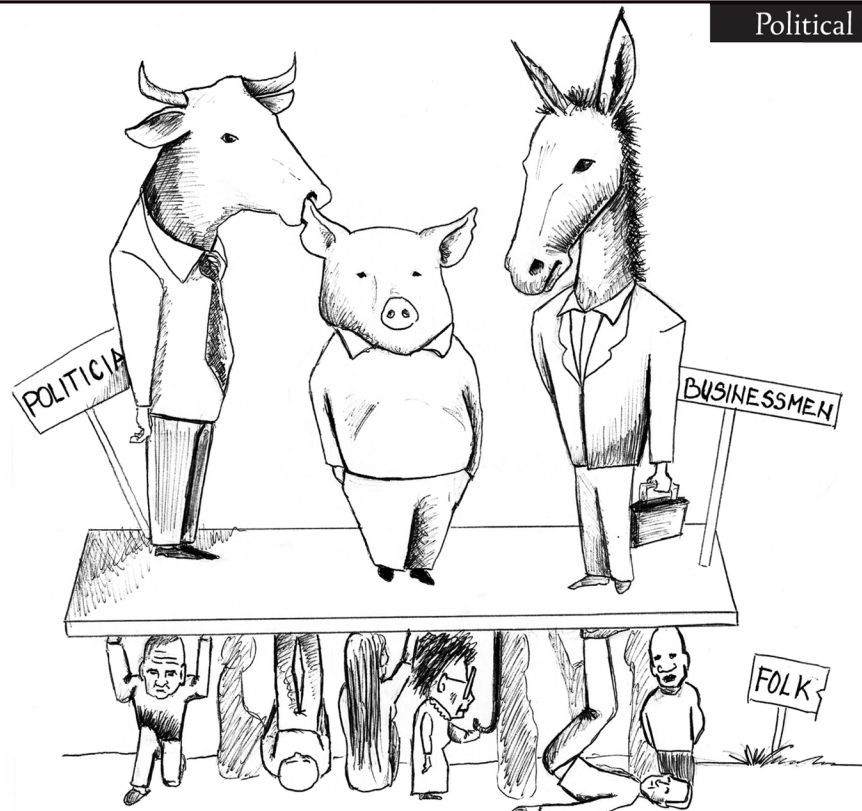
But there is an argument to be made that some research, like the hunt for the Higgs boson, should not require any practical justification. America once believed in this logic, sending a man to the moon out of the sheer desire to discover and achieve. Have we moved to a period in which science must be practical to receive governmental support? To remain economically and intellectually competitive with the rest of the world, America's scientific community must resist this trend.

The classroom is probably the most obvious place to start—it's well-known that the US lags behind in mathematics and science

in Chicago. While this fortress attitude is understandable considering the siege they've been under for the past eight years, it must stop now. The electric atmosphere of that conference space should be shared with the rest of the country.

Obama's presidency has undeniably inaugurated a new era for American science. Hopefully, it will truly endorse freedom of discovery in all areas, not just those short-term enough to be politically saleable. As our European colleagues remind us, *science will be done*. We cannot fail to be a robust part of this crucial endeavor.

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CC '10



Political Cartoon

Igor Simic

Let us *hope* this works.

READING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Political children's literature, parenting, and free will

by Nick Kelly

Now that we've emerged from our national fantasy of bipartisanship—and what a splendid two weeks it was—a strong dose of reality seems in order. And where better to begin that reality check not with Washington, where we conveniently lay the blame for all our partisan woes, but somewhere closer to home—not with our neighbors, not even with ourselves. Think back even further to the inception of your political beliefs, and you'll find an even more welcome culprit: your parents.

Help! Mom! There Are Liberals Under My Bed! starts innocently enough, with the classic tale of two enterprising brothers out to make a buck by starting a lemonade stand.

In the age of the internet, when most kids would rather watch SpongeBob rap on Youtube than read a book, one practice stands as a bulwark against the advancing forces of pop culture: story-time. Endearingly quaint, unbearably wholesome, those 20 minutes before bed remain sacred (if not for children, then for their well-meaning parents). What could possibly be wrong with that?

Enter the political children's book. In the form of such subtle offerings as *Help! Mom! There Are Liberals Under My Bed!* and *Mama Voted for Obama*, we find not only a grave threat to the innocence we accord our treasured story-time, but also a deep expression of the partisan faultlines that have defined the past eight years. These books raise questions that pierce the very bases of our political values. While even breathing one's politics in the classroom can spell career suicide for a teacher, few of us have such qualms about the political education children receive outside of school, least of all in their homes. Through a social sleight of hand, we have convinced ourselves that these different aspects of our lives—the school desk and the

kitchen table, the state and the home, the public and the private—can be cordoned off from one another. But we need to face up to the uncomfortable reality that politics infiltrates all these spheres. Our political lives can begin as early as “once upon a time.”

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Help! Mom! There Are Liberals Under My Bed! starts innocently enough, with the classic tale of two enterprising brothers out to make a buck by starting a lemonade stand. Quickly, though, a cast of liberal characters terrorizes them. Mayor Leach (an obese, thinly disguised Ted Kennedy) shouts “Boo-yah!” before running off with half the children's money; a grotesque, fawning “LCLU” activist forces the boys to appease a passing limousine commuter by taking their picture of Jesus down; Congresswoman *Clunk-ton* removes the sugar from their lemonade while adding Broccoli. Her mantra? “It takes a village to get kids to eat their vegetables!”

Like any good ideological work, *Help! Mom!*... fuses a number of different ideas—here libertarianism, capitalism, and Christianity—into a coherent whole.

But it also does this through a story of personal transformation. No longer the “good little boys” they were at the beginning of the tale, the brothers become “good little conservatives.” They achieve political consciousness, DeBrecht seems to say, only through close encounters of the liberal kind. By writing the children as innocent protagonists, though, DeBrecht does more than paint liberals in a bad light. She enlists her child readers by establishing an experience that is supposed to run parallel to theirs. All the while, she suggests that just as the fictional liberals prey on small, unsuspecting young things, so too do the real ones.

The Democratic alternative is a bit tamer, if no more subtle. Rather than dig against the other side, these books play to the truest liberal stereotype by reveling in their own smugness. *Mama Voted for Obama* reads like a hastily written Democratic pat-on-the-back, a feel-good guide for the mother desperately in need of self-congratulation. With such adorable gems as “She didn’t vote for an iguana or a piranha...Mama voted for Obama!” though, one wonders if the authors thought they could win over kids with sheer cuteness.

But perhaps they can—and that’s exactly the problem. Though we usually tolerate political marketing that appeals to the less-than-rational features of human psychology (think of Obama’s already legendary “O” campaign), we do so because we expect that adults can handle it. This is not the case with children who, prior to adolescence—or roughly 12 years of age—are much more susceptible to indoctrination. As Bismarck, known for his benevolent fatherly nature, once said: “You can do anything with children as long as

you play with them.”

Why Mommy Is A Democrat seems more benign, and for that reason becomes all the more insidious in its persuasion. The book fully embraces the oft-repeated idea that the Democrats are the “Mommy Party” by gendering political values: Democrats “make sure everyone always has enough to eat, just like Mommy does”; Democrats take care that “we are nice to people who are different, just like Mommy does.” But beyond a simple gendering, the book derives its real ideological power by collapsing the space between mother, child, and text. By equating the Democratic Party with Mommy, the book presents a terrible choice: do you love Mommy or the Republicans? For most kids, that’s a no-brainer.

To call *Why Mommy...* a “marvelous introduction to the values of Democrats,” as did one Air America Radio broadcaster, is thus dead right for the wrong reason. Like many supposedly straightforward “introductions” to politics, the book claims objectivity while making that neutrality impossible. Doubly manipulative in its ends and its disingenuous presentation, the book hits all the bases of political propaganda with grace.

The sequel, *Why Daddy Is A Democrat* (you can see a pattern emerging) works much less effectively because it states the virtues of the Democratic Party instead of associating them (say what it is, confusion with antecedent) with the father: “Sometimes the Earth feels a little sick...Democrats make it feel better again.” If you’re going to make children’s political propaganda, you might as well go all the way and promise the sky.

But what exactly is propaganda? Coun-

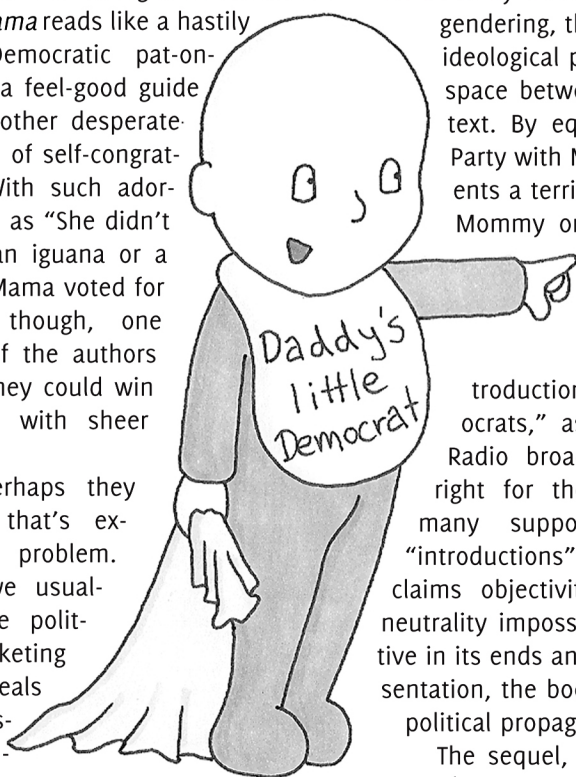
For political theorists Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, the question of children’s and parents’ rights goes to the heart of a conflict between two core liberal values: tolerance and autonomy.

ter to colloquial usage, it need not imply the promotion of a damaging belief. Rather, it refers to the way in which information, usually political, is expressed. Propaganda disseminates political

information that attempts to manipulate its viewers, often by appealing to emotional, unconscious or other elements of the mind that are not directly under our control. The 2008 presidential campaign boasted some of the most common propagandistic devices: Republicans used “socialism,” that dirty word of American politics, to taint Obama’s calls for more progressive taxation; Democrats deployed “hope” and “change” to fabricate emotional appeal for their policies.

These recent examples show us that propagandists would often contest that label, instead thinking of themselves as truth-tellers—as both parties would attest—and also, that propaganda varies in degrees of manipulation. Neither of the two examples compares to the compulsive power of Leni Riefenstahl’s classic Nazi propaganda piece *Triumph of the Will*, or even less arty projects such as the American red-baiting message machine of the Cold War or its Soviet counterpart, socialist realism.

Political children’s literature dovetails with our conceptions of propaganda in a strange way. While we normally try to classify propaganda by its power to control—Nazi calls to action at the most coercive end, perhaps claims of Obamaist “hope” at the other—political literature aimed at children is necessarily devious. Children are much more likely to believe what they absorb regardless of its truth value. The intended audience may seem to cast all political children’s literature as propagandistic. However, within the genre we find enough variation to check such a blanket dismissal. Children’s literature varies both in terms of its pol-



Rebecca Barrett

itics, from the radical to the mundane, and in its relative transparency. And if we dismiss all such children's literature, there may not be much left to complain about.

WRITER AS DEMAGOGUE

One might expect radical children's literature to make these recent partisan forays look like literal child's play. But sometimes just the opposite is true. Take this stanza from a set of Soviet-sympathizing, American Popular Front poems of the 1930s entitled *Pioneer Mother Goose*:

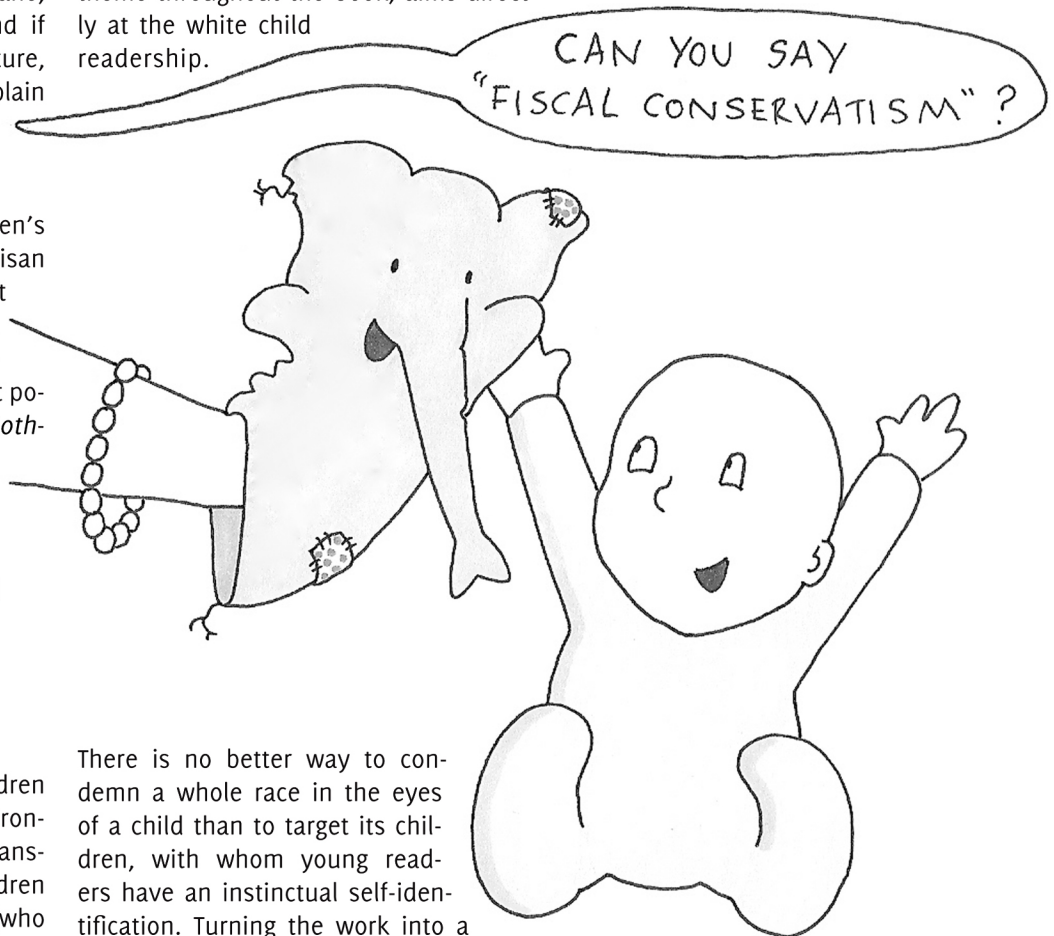
This bloated Pig
masters Wall Street,
This little Pig owns your home; [...]
These Pigs we'll send to market—
And will they squeal? You bet!
Down with Capitalism!
Long live the Soviet!

With no pretense of winning children over with cutesy talk, these poems ironically reassure us in their frank, transparent anger. Instead of luring children in through uncontested claims (who wants the earth to be "sick"?), these poems resemble street-side demagoguery: entertaining, but easily, or *more* easily, dismissible as junk. That's not to place these poems above reproach—they are, after all, propaganda aimed at children—but they may be less objectionable, strangely, than the coyly partisan texts of recent years.

The FBI, though, really demonstrates how propaganda is done (as well as some fine illustrating ability) in the underrated masterpiece *The Black Panther Coloring Book*. Purportedly a Black Panther production, the book was distributed by the Bureau to white households in 1969 to stoke fears of a black revolution. This, more than any other children's book, really must be seen to be believed.

As comically vulgar as it is ridiculous, the coloring book could serve as a how-to guide for the enterprising children's propagandist. Note the supremely well-dressed kid Panther. The use of black children as white cop killers, a recurrent

theme throughout the book, aims directly at the white child readership.



There is no better way to condemn a whole race in the eyes of a child than to target its children, with whom young readers have an instinctual self-identification. Turning the work into a coloring book is also a nice touch: what could be more infuriating, after all, than the thought of a black child casually filling in the outline of an emaciated white cop pig?

The Black Panther Coloring Book is at its strangest when it dramatizes scenes of slavery. One portrays a black man stabbing a slave owner pig in the back, with the caption, "The strong black man didn't like being a slave so he fought the white man back." Intended, I imagine, to explain the roots of the Panthers' anger at whites, these scenes equate contemporary cops with slave owners, creating an odd scenario in which the child is asked to express outrage at slave revolts. Subsequent scenes that emphasize the brutality of the killings—from the Nat Turner riots to one scene in which three "beautiful black men" stab, torch, and ax a slave owner while screaming, "Off the pig"—leave no doubt of the FBI's intentions. They manage to make slaves look guilty for revolting, a truly vicious histor-

ical jibe—all the worse if children actually believed it.

SUSPICIOUS ALLEGORY AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Radical and especially partisan children's books are so of-the-moment that they are fated to lose political relevance. Though the brazenness of these radical texts and their partisan counterparts makes them the most noticeable examples, the storybook genre also has a quiet irony: the most common and enduring form of political children's literature, the political allegory, often carries with it implications that are lost on adult readers.

Take the work of Dr. Seuss. Beloved by children and adults of every political stripe, Seuss was also a firebrand liberal, a fact that is incredibly obvious in many of his books—when one is looking for it. In his post-WWII work *Yertle the Turtle*, Seuss ridicules an egomaniacal turtle who tries to take over the pond—a thinly veiled attack on certain recent-

ly dethroned dictators. *Horton Hears A Who* has a similarly straightforward message: by celebrating an Elephant who stands up for the little people he finds on a speck of dust, against a disbelieving, puritanical jungle community, Seuss seems to deride the McCarthy trials (or, alternatively, the United States' occupation of Japan).

His work, of course, is often more explicitly political, if still written in allegorical form. Perhaps the most famous example of this is *The Sneetches*, a parable against racism released in 1961. It closes,

The day they decided that Sneetches
are Sneetches
And no kind of Sneetch is the best on
the beaches.
That day, all the Sneetches forgot
about stars
And whether they had one, or not,
upon thars.

it had *no* "moral or message." A 1680s Puritan ABC book begins: "A. In Adam's Fall / We Sinned all." Next to a picture of the Bible: "B. Thy Life to Mend / This Book Attend." Only after World War II did children's books start to take on a morally neutral cast.

The authors of *Tales for Little Rebels*, a new collection of radical leftist children's literature, even argue that the presence of politics immediately implicates morality: "Children's literature is necessarily involved in both morality (making distinctions between right and wrong) and politics. Teaching children to obey a higher authority may be understood as a moral lesson, but it can also be understood as a political lesson." By directly equating morality with politics, the authors can argue that most children's books reinforce the political status quo.

Asserting that "everything is political" in this way, though, is not rigorous enough. Everything can be construed as political, and everything has: one recent

able to choose their own political values. This assumption lies at the heart of the democratic tradition.

But how free are we, really, to choose our own views? And how honest are we when we endorse that liberty?

FREE TO BELIEVE... WHAT YOUR PARENTS BELIEVE

In a recent study by three University of California professors, 60 percent of the children who shared the partisan views of their parents in 1965 had those same party identifications over 50 years later. Parents who spend more time discussing politics, are politically active, and have defined partisan beliefs are much more likely to leave a political imprint. Partisan parents, unsurprisingly, raise partisan kids.

Of course, children are not passive receptacles of political ideology. "We are certainly shaped by our childhood, but not in predictable ways because children can sometimes have a negative

Like any good ideological work, *Help! Mom! There are Liberals Under My Bed!* fuses a number of different ideas—here libertarianism, capitalism, and Christianity—into a coherent whole.

The supremely political meaning of this text is hard to miss. But the point is that many children *will* miss it. Take the *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Few children know, or care, that the story allegorizes the social and economic crises of the 1890s. Many adults don't know or care either. By expressing political ideas through large metaphors, authors not only chance that their messages will go unnoticed, they also leave their work open to interpretation. Well-executed children's political allegory, then, less resembles propaganda than it does that other kind of kids' storybook: art.

Politics can manifest in children's literature in many ways, but does it have to? It is a sign of our times that we even ask this question. For most of publishing history, children's literature existed exactly for the purpose of teaching its readers a lesson. Seuss' first children's book was rejected by publishers because

study derides the state of "unconscious censorship" in children's literature for its focus on individuals as perpetuating—get this—individualism. *Tales for Little Rebels* also criticizes books featuring cars for perpetuating our car culture, and books that cast adults in a good light for teaching children to "trust adults." Surely, these concepts are political in a sense, but only because they reflect the larger culture of which they are a part. By implicating all children's literature in the same crime, we confuse our terms.

Nevertheless, this question of intentionality may be exactly the point. By disclosing the subtle ways in which kids' books perpetuate our cultural norms and unsettle the distinction between politics and morality, these critiques hint at a deeper problem lurking beneath our revulsion to political children's literature. We believe, or think we believe, that both children and adults can and should be

identification with their parents and pursue opposite paths," says Deanna Kuhn, Psychology and Education Professor at Columbia. "We see too many examples of major changes of path and perspective in adulthood." We all know rebel children. A study by Professor Michael McDevitt has emphasized, furthermore, that children are often the ones to initiate political discussions with their parents, sometimes even teaching the adults.

But, of course, our parents are only one influence on our political development. Other sources, such as community, cultural and religious values, and the media are similarly instrumental in shaping our political beliefs. If raised as an evangelical, you're pretty likely to vote Republican (74 percent of you did in the 2008 election). Jewish? You're even more likely to vote Democratic (78 percent). And it is no surprise that partisan differences break down by region as well (85 percent

of Manhattan voters went for Obama).

The Black Panther Coloring Book was distributed in 1969 by the FBI to white households to stoke fears of a black revolution. This book really must be seen to be believed.

We are more determined politically—even predetermined—by our environment than we’d like to think.

If we are so shaped by forces beyond our consciousness; if we inherit partisanship over family generations; if, in short, we arrive at adulthood inevitably indoctrinated—why, despite all this, do we still object to political children’s literature? Because unlike family relationships, whose power dynamics can remain cloaked in normalcy, books like *Help! Mom!* highlight in conspicuous, illustrated form the usually ignorable political realities of family life. Isn’t indoctrination—no matter its form—still indoctrination?

CONFRONTING THE LIMITS OF FREE WILL

Two options emerge from this confusing situation, where our moral revulsion to partisan children’s books contradicts our everyday acceptance (tacit or not) of parents’ power in this same realm. We could accept our (relatively) deterministic fate as an unavoidable, if perhaps tragic fact of life. Or we could follow this rejection of political children’s literature to its logical conclusion, by critiquing the easy transmission of belief from parent to child as an intrusion on the child’s freedom.

Parents and non-parents alike might, however, assert their *right*—not a legal right, for they surely have that, but a moral one—to influence their

children. Here we encounter a fundamental tension in the way we conceive of politics. On the one hand, we want to allow children their intellectual independence. But many adults hold their political opinions very dearly; their political opinions, they think, are *right*. And don’t parents have the moral right—duty, even—to influence their children, teaching them political truths as they see fit?

In other realms, both courts and social norms accord parents great liberty in raising their children, both at home and in public life (they can pass on their religious beliefs, for instance, or choose where they send their child to school). And some might interject that in many such instances, children still remain free to choose, ultimately—they can revise their beliefs at any stage of life (rejecting their parents’ religion, or joining the circus).

We, of course, also have the legal right to choose our political beliefs. But not all freedoms are created equal. Social factors, such as our parents’ rights to pass on their political beliefs, can make that freedom not only impracticable but un-

thinkable. We have to ask ourselves whether we are content to live with that vast difference between the freedom children have in law on the one hand, and their practical liberties on the other. Though views will differ, our moral intuitions against preschool party indoctrination point toward an expansive concept of freedom, one where we ask more of parents than the law demands.

But what should we ask of them? We are wading into issues that go to the very heart of the fundamental rights of child and parent. As our society operates within the liberal tradition, broadly conceived—with a focus on individuals and their resulting rights—we might see this issue, as political theorists Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift do, as a conflict between two core liberal values: tolerance and autonomy. While we normally tolerate what individuals do privately so long as they don’t harm others, the parent-child relationship raises a difficult situation due to the extensive authority parents hold over their children. How do we begin to think about protecting a child’s autonomy?

We cannot justify the right of parents



“Brothers and sisters deal with the white store owner that robs black people” in *The Black Panther Coloring Book*

to pass on their political beliefs to their children through the usual argument that the decision will benefit the minor involved. There is no way to argue, objectively, that one parent's particular set of political convictions will aid the child more than another reasonable such set.

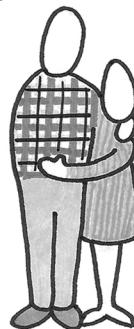
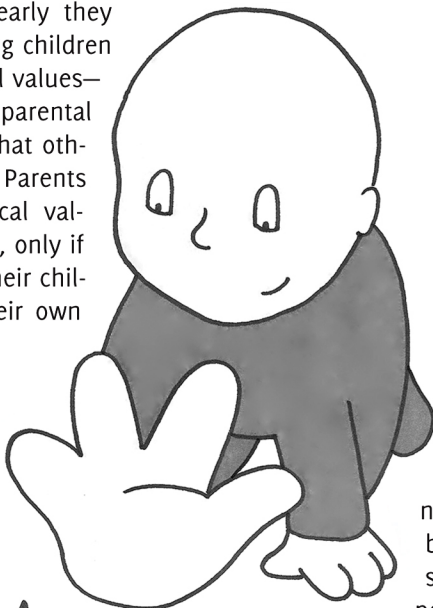
To justify parents' rights then, we have to argue, counter-intuitively, that *parents* benefit in some way. And clearly they do: parents find value in raising children who hold the "correct" political values—their political values. But this parental right must be tempered with that other liberal principle: autonomy. Parents can advance their own political values, Brighouse and Swift argue, only if they simultaneously support their children's freedom to develop their own perspectives.

POLITICAL PARENTING

A delicate tightrope act for even the most conscientious parent, this view of parenting as the promotion of a child's autonomy sounds great in theory. But is it even thinkable in practice? What would such a relationship actually look like?

One children's story offers an interesting analogy. *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* asks us to consider a related question: what would a *genderless* child look like? Though at first ridiculed by fellow classmates, X—a child raised without gender (as opposed to sex)—ends up socializing just fine with others of the same age. X succeeds not by attempting

the impossible task of abstaining totally from gender, but by embracing an excess of gender, playing with girls' *and* boys' toys, girls' *and* boys' games. Like gender, politics and its power implications cannot be kept from children entirely—children cannot be shielded from the political world. Per-



Rebecca Barrett

haps, like X, they just need to hear both (or more) sides of every political issue. Maybe this would be a true democracy of choice.

But the 'both sides' of every issue framework fails not only as a model for political debate and presentation, but also (and especially) as a model for political child-raising. Presenting children with two equally "good" options in isolation, even if both factually correct, does little to help them make reasoned decisions about their own political beliefs. Parents must do more than offer simple

comparison—they must push their children toward the beginnings of analysis.

One way to help children choose, for sure, is for parents to present a number of political viewpoints—not only their own, but also those they disagree with. But beyond that, parents can encourage children to think *critically* about politics by explaining the values that underlie their political beliefs. Parents might read *Why Mommy Is A Democrat* at the same time as *Help! Mom!*, probing the relative values of both parties through the books.

Asking adults to engage in such an objective consideration of politics may seem like a lot to ask. And indeed it is: adults rarely rethink, or think deeply, about their own politics. By weighing the values that stir their political beliefs as well as those viewpoints that are hostile to them, parents are forced to step out of their political shoes, if for just a moment. They reeducate themselves even as they instruct their kids.

Wrenching children out of their parents' political shadow gets us part of the way toward reclaiming our political free will. But it does more. Extremism often incites an equally strong reaction against it, especially when it strikes at our deepest innocence. Discovering that this extremism is really just a more outrageous expression of some of our most accepted social practices, though, should not weaken our resolve to challenge it—no matter its social form. By asking parents to raise their children as politically critical and thoughtful, we can start to address the deep partisan divides that will continue, despite the best intentions, to haunt us. That would be the beginning of a real education.

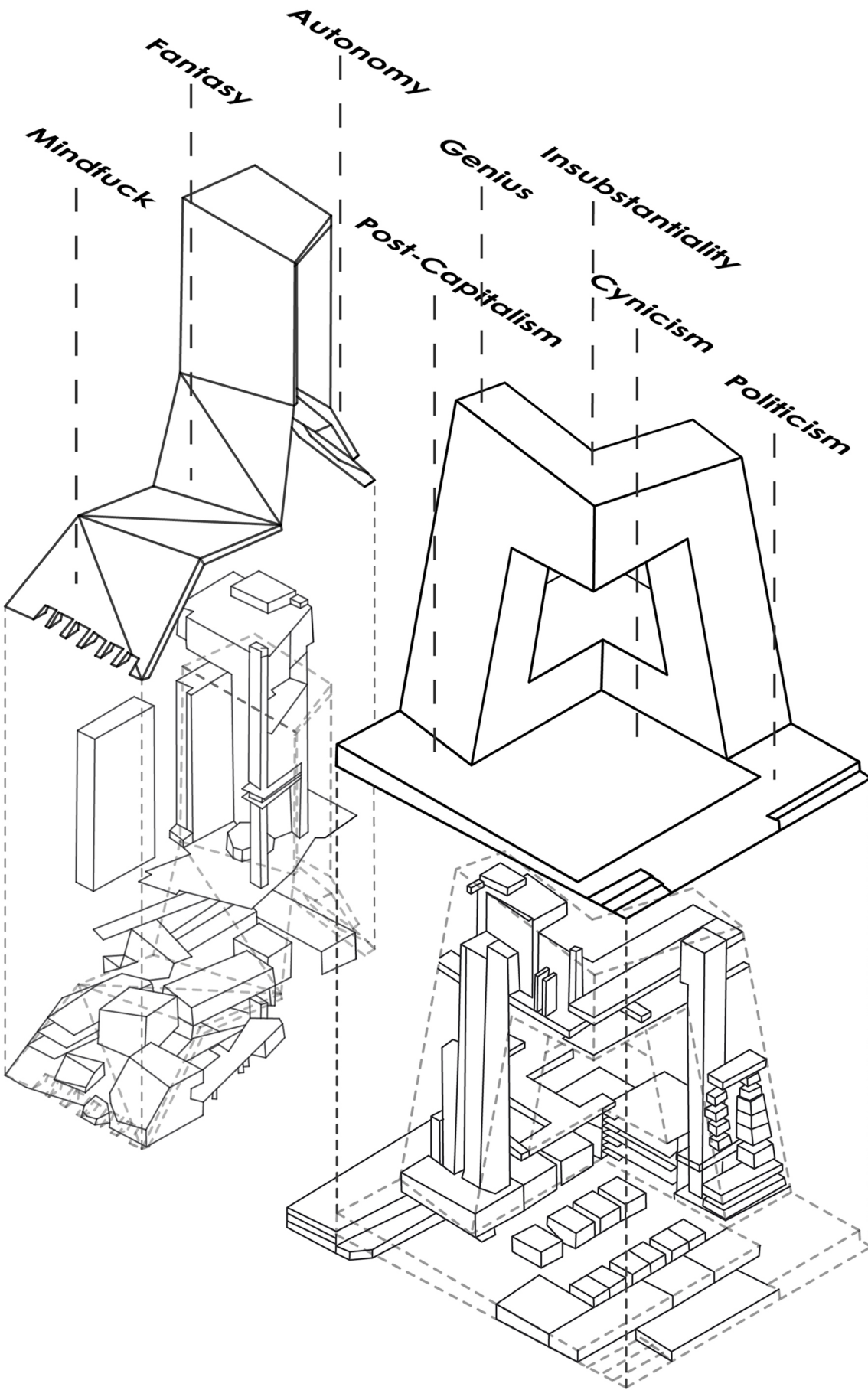
In a recent study by three University of California professors, 60 percent of the children who shared the partisan views of their parents in 1965 held those same party identifications over 50 years later.

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Toward a Starchitecture

Foundations for an architecture built on dreams



uring the moments when the 44th president of the United States promised a brighter, shinier American future, the China Central Television Company's live newsfeed of Obama's inauguration became the center of media attention in that country. But at 1:17AM Beijing time, CCTV cut from the simultaneous translation of Obama's speech back to the hosting anchor. Flustered, she confusedly began questioning her guest political analyst on Obama's economic policy. The line skipped in the inauguration speech: "Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism, not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions." The Xinhua translator continued after the impromptu Q&A as if nothing had happened.

Watching the CCTV speech, and attempting to understand the theoretical polemics of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who designed the channel's headquarters in Beijing, are similar provocations. Koolhaas, a principal of the famed design firm Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA),

also inspires an experience of complacency followed by alarmed confusion. A nodding at a string of acceptable ideas, then a suspension of disbelief so sudden that you wonder if his readers are really supposed to take him seriously—a reaction both aesthetic and political.

DISSECTING A BUILDING THAT EXPLODES BEFORE THE FIRST CUT

In Koolhaas' most recent publication, *S,M,L,XL*, an encyclopedia-sized volume of his theoretical writings, the architect lays down the foundations of his theory of architectural Bigness—an idea crucial to his design from the late 90s to now, on the eve of the completion of the CCTV building (which has been heralded as revolutionary to the concept of the skyscraper). The theory of Bigness is intentionally vague, so vague that it verges on self-defeating. But simultaneously, the argument makes itself oddly impregnable—in its ineffability, Bigness is self-protective, almost impervious to critique.

What is this paradoxical system? Bigness theorizes that, as a design reaches a certain capacity—Koolhaas, of course, does not specify what this capacity is—the building becomes an autonomous system that functions on its own terms. It cuts itself off from its environment by virtue of its complexity, becoming ahistorical. Koolhaas' theory has been seen as emancipatory, freeing the architect from a moral imperative to political responsibility. Partly for this reason, Koolhaas has been able to justify his controversial work for CCTV in China, and for a mini-island city within Dubai. And unsurprisingly, Koolhaas' OMA has been barraged by "politically concerned" critics who see his work as complicit with such vaguely defined evils as commercialization and suppressions of speech freedoms.

Yet Koolhaas' architecture is political in another sense. His system celebrates the complexity of human interaction—the overlapping of personal stories. So even as Bigness may appear ahistoric—perhaps in the same way CCTV's omission was ahistoric—Koolhaas' work, privileging short-lived micro-histories instead of seeking larger, more coherent narratives, is also supremely political. His system recognizes the culture of increasing attention-deficiency inspired by a post-capitalist global village in which our eyes, hungry for pretty shapes, are allowed to fleet from building to building.

CONTROL: THE COMPULSIVE WHITE LIE OF ARCHITECTURE

In an interview with *Wired* in 1997, Koolhaas commented that "People can inhabit anything. And they can be miserable in anything. More and more I think architecture has nothing to do with it. It's both liberating and alarming." He goes on to say, "Architecture can't do anything that the culture doesn't. We all complain that we are confronted by urban environments that are completely similar. We say we want to create beauty, identity, quality, singularity. And yet, maybe in truth these cities that we have are desired. Maybe their very characterlessness provides the best context for living." This is Koolhaas' concept of the Generic City—the contemporary megapolis that announces the final death of planning in our age.

Of course, this is not to say that Koolhaas believes these cities—among which are Tokyo, Singapore, and our own Manhattan—are not planned. In fact, he recognizes that "huge complementary universes of bureaucrats and developers funnel unimaginable flows of energy and money into [the Generic City's completion]; with the same money, its plains can be fertilized by diamonds, its mud fields paved in gold bricks."

What Koolhaas takes issue with is the absurdity of the Modern architectural revolution as proposed by the likes of Le Corbusier, who believed that the informed sequencing of spaces and the creation of sublime constructions would lead to universally understandable forms, and through them, an abstract happiness. Casting these theories aside, Koolhaas declares that "the most dangerous and most exhilarating discovery is that the planning makes no difference whatsoever."

Writing on the modern city-state, Koolhaas instead documents the unpredictability that results from each attempt to establish a regime of control. He comes to see Singapore as a model for the Generic City: divorced from context, based on nothing but efficiency, speed, and mobility, with history reduced to a token theme park. "Control only expands the edge of chaos," he writes. "From Singapore, though, you can draw conclusions: history will disappear; the *tabula rasa* will be the norm; control will be episodic, proceeding through enclaves, so that it won't generate an overall coherence; the skyscraper—Bigness—will be the last remaining typology." It's important for us to realize that Kool-

haas is not so much interested in judging Singapore as understanding it—he’s not a Utopian architect with a political vision of the ideal city or society—and he doesn’t believe that architects are capable of building ideal cities, in any case.

And this skepticism over planning’s power to generate narratives of meaningful human interaction is why Koolhaas is widely recognized as among the most cynical of contemporary architects. Earnest

architects like Bernard Tschumi (incidentally, the designer of Lerner Hall) seek to understand human interactions with each other and with architecture by positing experience as a series of episodes that form a narrative. Koolhaas makes no pretension of writing Homeric hymns. Bigness is quite unheroic. As Columbia Architecture professor John Rajchman noted in his seminal *Artforum* article on Koolhaas, it is a theory that is indifferent and impersonal—not “colossal,” not “sublime.” It is labyrinthine and the point is not to find a way out, but rather to find new ways of moving about within its complexities and specificities, reinventing and reassembling its paths. Bigness is thus not an ideal, not a master plan—and that is why it denies what urbanism has supposed: that we might actually construct cities.

CHAOS/COMPLEXITY: MAKING SENSE OF PLANNING’S VANITY

Rajchman would go on to observe in *Thinking Big*, “Bigness is a philosophy averse to the earlier architectural urges to control or plan everything, and to work instead with unnoticed possibilities in a situation we realize we can’t completely master. It is to accept that cities are clashes of forces with unpredictable outcomes, loose assemblages from which new things and new connections derive.” It is a celebra-

tion of the most basic, yet most glaringly overlooked result of the past 150 years of building—it is a way of seeing things that have been unseen, of releasing new possibilities in our ways of being.

Indeed, as demonstrated by the Singapore-as-Generic-City case study, Koolhaas’ game is one of resigned observation, in the sense that he believes we will never understand how this surely-existent, underlying system of human activity works, or how its ef-

fects are produced. We will probably never know, and Koolhaas’ complex designs

point to this. But his cynicism is still colored by a hint of romance: his resolve to continue designing despite planning’s inherent absurdity suggests hope in the capacity to generate fantasy. Arguably, Koolhaas is guilty of the same delusions of grandeur found in Le Corbusier.

Yet Koolhaas’ success has been predicated not on his connection to a modernist past, but on his subversiveness. His OMA has been described as a kind of mobilized war machine, engaging in “an ongoing struggle with developers, politicians, engineers, government agencies, and professors to introduce the fresh air of a new kind of urbanism, a new way of thinking about cities, which analyzes specificities while multiplying possibilities.”

But inasmuch as this theory envisions architecture as the mirror to urbanity’s complex networks, it may also be complicit with late capitalism—that idea of our global economy of which neo-Marxists are so critical. To be sure, Koolhaas has famously called himself a surfer, figuring “world culture as a huge ocean... and rid-

Robert Somol, Director of the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois, jokes that Koolhaas is like Clint Eastwood: You don’t know if he’s cool or boring.

I The Tenets of Bigness

In Koolhaas’ essay “Generic City,” collected in his 1978 book *Delirious New York*, he implied a latent “Theory of Bigness” that he would explicate in *S,M,L,XL*. The theory would be a set of qualifiers and goals for the contemporary structure founded on five principles:

1. Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a Big Building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture, or even by any combination of architectural gestures.
2. The elevator negates issues of composition, scale, proportion, and detail, and thus the “art” of architecture, through its potential to establish mechanical rather than architectural connections.
3. In Bigness, the distance between the core and the envelope of the building increases to the point where the façade can no longer reveal what happens inside. This humanist (and Modernist) expectation is doomed.
4. Through size alone, such buildings enter an amoral domain, beyond good or bad. Their impact is independent of their quality.
5. Together, all these breaks with scale—with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics—imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue.

ing the crest.”

And it would be exactly upon these grounds that the likes of critic Michael Sorkin would attack Koolhaas. In “Some Assembly Required,” he denounces Koolhaas’ strategies as empty of moral judgment, arguing, “Global warming, the rapid disappearance of habitats and ecosystems, worldwide pollution, and the breakneck homogenization of the built environment are all symptomatic of a world in which we can no more consider ourselves simply another species than we can stand raptly outside it, shivering at its majesty.”

To critics like Sorkin, Koolhaas is cloyingly romantic, aspiring to a kind of post-technological sublimity. “For him,” Sorkin insists, “the onrush of globalization was merely irresistible, it had an aesthetic authority in its deep imprinting of form. Such ‘generic’ urbanism represented an unavoidable default, a condition growing au-

question of “non-modernism,” “second modernism,” or “hypermodernism,” as he may call it, is highly political in the sense that it produces architecture (such as the CCTV headquarters) that recognizes the presence of politics. And to be sure, Koolhaas’ ahistorical architecture is not meant to function independently from cultural reality—instead, it performs alongside of it.

Among the most influential Koolhaas proponents is Robert Somol, Director of the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois, who jokes that Koolhaas is like Clint Eastwood: You don’t know if he’s cool or boring. Somol sees in Koolhaas a jaded view of Critical-Architecture and a subsequent embrace of the late capitalist and supershiny. For Somol, Koolhaas heralds the advent of fantasy architecture.

Somol’s critiques, commonly labeled a post-critical Projective Theory of architecture, attempt to withdraw from a per-

ate architecture program, one of the most fatal mistakes that a student can make is failing to include a proper silhouette in rendered section or perspective drawings, indicating how people would use the space. Contrary to what Koolhaas might suggest, this is often quite predictable. You can’t draw a ballerina on the final drawing of your bike path and claim that your landscaping project is going to inspire a dancer to get into her tights and pirouette. People act in unexpected ways, sometimes generating Koolhaasian chaos, but they’re not really *that* random.

Bigness’ flexibility, though, might shield Koolhaas from the charge that his conception of unruly human interaction doesn’t describe the way we actually relate to buildings. As a design principle, Bigness emphatically asserts a framework, but allows for individual discovery. Whether the observer’s reaction is one of com-

Koolhaas has famously called himself a surfer, figuring “world culture as a huge ocean... and riding the crest.”

tonomously, throwing up its endlessness of freeways and airports, office towers and gated communities, McDonald’s, and KFCs. The surfer epistemology panders to this updated universality with a canny resignation of agency, and hence responsibility.” Put simply, Koolhaas is a hypocrite whose design principle attempts to emancipate itself from culture, but actually reproduces it. Is this truly a fair reading of Koolhaas?

INDEPENDENCE IS NOT A SPATIAL CONCEPT SUGGESTIVE OF DISTANCE

Critiques from the likes of Sorkin come to underline the difference between having a political stance and being politically interested. Anthropologist Bruno Latour has made this point: “[Koolhaas is] said to be cynical, because he is not politically correct, in the sense of simply articulating the critical idiom,” he writes. “So he is often accused of being complacent and conniving with market forces, as if he were sort of enjoying this kind of power in architecture. Of course he does not have a political stance in the sense that he does not say what he is supposed to say or what makes people feel good—which is that market forces are dominated by late capitalism.”

However, Koolhaas’ handling of the

ceived theoretical stagnation in contemporary architecture. Instead, architects like Somol design buildings that are more easily relatable, and hence, more public—even populist. This faction generally tries to make architectural theory more salient by forging tectonic identity in easily legible shape. The goal is a franker architecture that finally begins to recognize public consciousness and imagination in the vulgar reception of buildings, whether or not each detail is pregnant with conceptual intent. It is for many architects an uncomfortable admission that sometimes—probably most of the time—people do not care if the CCTV building was designed to be a semi-self-contained biome whose interior was carefully planned to act as a mediapolis with multiple circulation pathways that seamlessly and physically bind different program functions together. “Some Beijingers,” Paul Goldberger ironically notes in his June 2008 review, “have taken to calling it Big Shorts [after its shape].”

THE VANITY OF RECOGNIZING CONCEIT

It is the question of how people actually interact with buildings that may cast Koolhaas’ spectacular theoretical gymnastics as overly idealistic, and Somol’s praise as reductive. In the Columbia undergradu-

placency, awe, or skepticism springs out of the moment—and is therefore, Koolhaas would probably suggest, unknowable in advance.

Perhaps Koolhaas hopes to inspire not a grounded period, but a floating question mark about contemporary architectural practice. He’s very much like Andy Warhol in this respect: a militant avant-garde figure and/or cynical joker whose work is so brilliant that you can’t ignore it, but whom you’re not sure you should take seriously for fear that it’s all just one big prank at your personal expense. Undeniably though, Koolhaas is transforming skylines. As Richard Lacayo writes in the architect’s profile for *TIME Magazine*’s list of the World’s Most Influential People in 2008, “He may not be a man who wants to impose his vision on the world, but somehow the world is looking more and more like he wants it to.”

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Iraq's Antiques Roadshow

The past under siege in Iraq and the United States

Lane Sell

In January 1943 a frail, bookish French woman in oversized spectacles walked into the Free French command in London. She had just arrived from Marseilles by way of New York, and she wanted to be a paratrooper. Her name was Simone Weil. No one knew what to do with her, until it was discovered that she could write. The French pressed her into an office job, drafting dispatches and sorting through the piles of proposals that poured in daily for reconstruction projects in post-occupation France. At night, she locked herself in and wrote, producing (among other things) a proposal of her own, a 300-page tome titled *The Need for Roots*.

The work is remarkable for its content but, more than that, it is remarkable for the spirit in which it was conceived. Weil was unconcerned with rebuilding factories, infrastructure, or government in the conventional sense; what she proposed instead was a program for rebuilding the spirit of the French people. In Weil's view, human collectivities exist to provide for the needs of the soul which "form, like our physical needs, a necessary condition of our life on this earth." *The Need for Roots*, then, became a program for growing the organs in society that could feed a people's souls—roots. The French, as she saw them, had been uprooted.

Though *The Need For Roots* was written for a different time and place, Weil's thought holds special resonance for us today in the particular conditions of the US occupation of Iraq. The souls of the Iraqi people have been starved by dictatorship, genocide, three Gulf wars, and now a foreign occupation. Perhaps "reconstruction" should be geared not only to infrastruc-

ture and industry, but also to that which makes public life and nationhood, economy and industry, both possible and necessary—the souls of the people of who inhabit and make the nation. In Iraq, the past itself—its record and its physical traces—is under siege. This has implications not only for the past of Iraq, but also for the heritage of civilization itself. "Of all the soul's needs," Weil wrote, "none is more vital than this one for the past." The past provides the raw materials from which we learn who we are and who we can aspire to be—it provides human beings the tools to create a future, and it offers the sustenance of a thousand generations of experience to deal with the ever-new phenomena of the world.

The range of threats to Iraq's cultural heritage is vast, and the story goes back far beyond the 2003 invasion. Saddam Hussein's regime may be best known for its genocidal attacks on the Kurds, but it was also responsible for subtler assaults on Iraq's Republican past, as well as the intentional environmental destruction of the Fertile Crescent—an effort to ethnically cleanse the Shi'a farmers who inhabited the region by turning their rich marshlands (also a major world habitat for migrating birds and the largest wetland in the Middle East) into a dustbowl. Here, a few examples will have to suffice in outlining the continuing danger to Iraq's past: the looting and subsequent misuse of Iraq's museums, the pillaging of historical sites and its destabilizing political impact in the provinces, and the actions of the United States military in establishing bases on sites of cultural significance.

Much ink has been spilled about the looting of Iraq's National Museum follow-

ing the capture of Baghdad in March 2003. Approximately 17,000 artifacts were looted, including the 5,000 year-old Sacred Vase of Warka, the oldest surviving example of narrative relief. To date, about 10,000 of those stolen objects have been recovered (Warka Vase included) by means ranging from raids and seizures to voluntary return under amnesty to discovery through Syrian reality television; many still remain missing.

But the National Museum was not the only repository to suffer, although it has received considerably more attention than other institutions. The National Museum benefits from general Western perceptions of the country's particular historical significance. We think of Iraq as an ancient land, the site of the of old Mesopotamia and the birthplace of world civilization. With news of the museum's looting came an outpouring of international support and a large-scale effort to recover the stolen artifacts. International concern did not extend to the country's more recent past and the cultural achievements of later periods, however.

In *Modernism and Iraq*, Columbia's Zainab Bahrani, Professor of Near Eastern Art and Archaeology, notes, "This attitude is perhaps the main reason why... the Museum of Modern Art, famous throughout the Middle East for its extensive collection of late 19th and 20th century art, received little attention from the press or international nongovernmental organizations that mobilized so quickly to rescue stolen art and antiquities of the earlier eras of Mesopotamian antiquity." While it existed, the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad posed a real challenge to the consistent and pernicious notion that "the fine arts in Mesopotamia or Ottoman Iraq ended just as

The National Museum, once controlled by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, is now administered by the Ministry of Tourism.

Modernism began to develop in the West." With its erasure, the primitivizing myth that Iraq has no modern past edges closer to assuming the mantle of truth not only for outsiders, but also for a new generation of Iraqis growing up in the shadow of the occupation—those who will matter most truly to the nation's future. Iraq's modern heritage is one of decolonization, a struggle that cost blood enough in military coups against the Hashemite monarchy and later the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941. Losing the visual and artistic record of this period is a stunning blow to the process by which both Iraqis and Americans might begin to think about the pitfalls of that first decolonization and what peace ought to entail today (a blow that few in power, Iraqi or American, seem to consider as such).

Even less notice has been taken of Iraq's National Library and State Archive, so thoroughly wrecked by fire and looting that no plans remain of Baghdad's infrastructure—its plans for electricity and sewage, to give just a few examples—never mind the documentary history of the nation. As of late 2007, no appreciable funding had been made available to the Library for reconstruction, and none of the major charitable organizations that traditionally take an interest in education had stepped forward (Carnegie, Gates, and MacArthur, for instance).

The National Museum just reopened on February 23, a fact much touted in the press as evidence of Iraq's "slow return to normalcy" (AP). But a closer look at the museum's reopening begs the question: for whom was the museum reopened, and for what purpose? "We have ended the black wind (of violence) and have started the reconstruction process," President Nouri al-Maliki declared at the opening gala with an almost brazen optimism. That optimistic front recalls the last time the National Museum was opened, under the auspices of the Coalition Provisional Authority

(CPA) and Presidential Envoy L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer. On July 3, 2003, the museum exhibited a selection of 616 pieces known as the Nimrud Gold, an Assyrian treasure horde that stands as one of the museum's centerpieces. The exhibit, ordered on short notice, opened and closed in a single day, because the CPA feared the treasure horde would be stolen if it remained

reopen the museum was taken sometime in early February, and it quickly sparked a wave of reaction in the archaeological community. (The National Museum, once controlled by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, is now administered by the Ministry of Tourism—a detail telling enough in and of itself.)

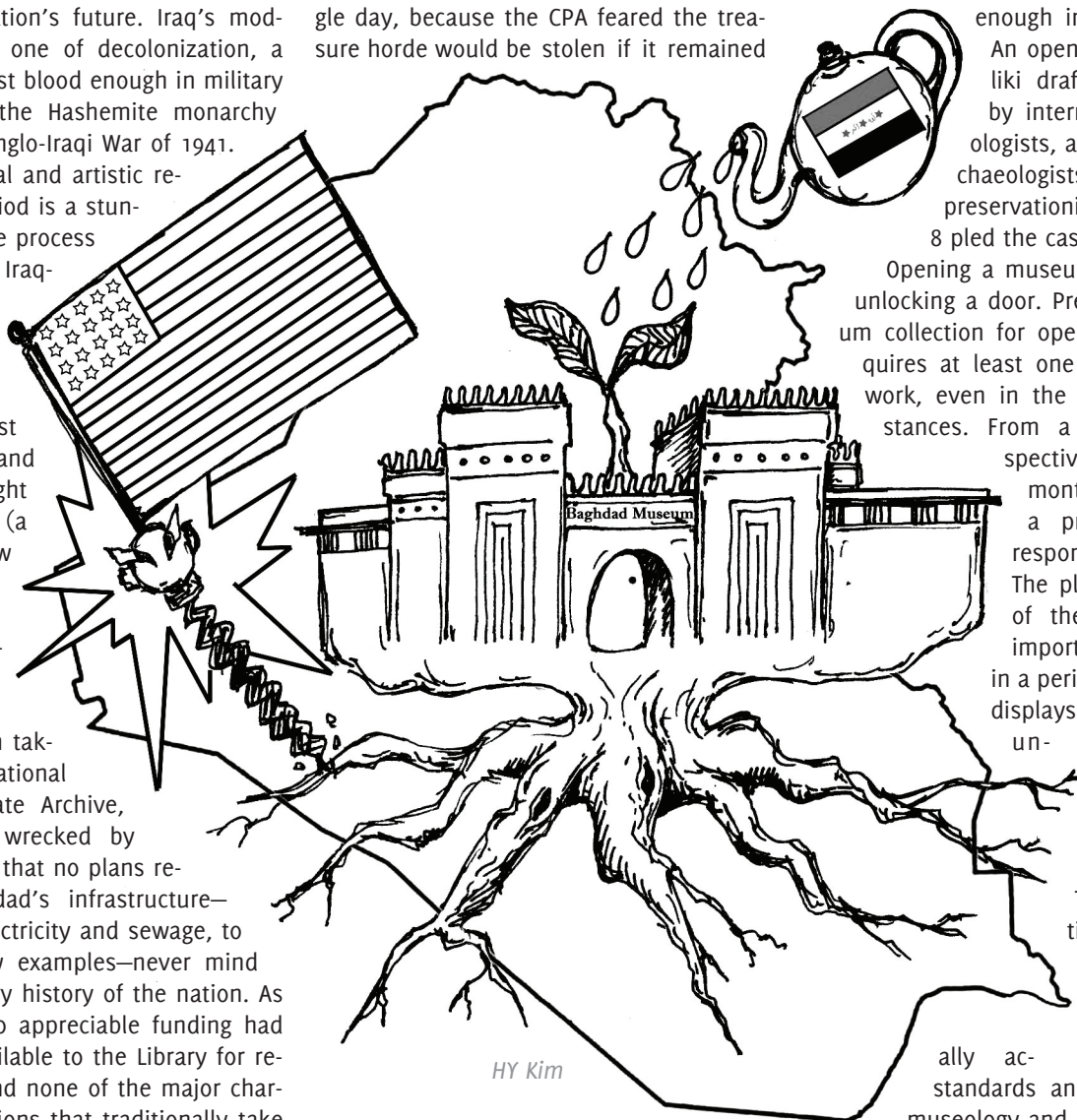
An open letter to al-Maliki drafted and signed by international archaeologists, art historians, archaeologists, curators and preservationists on February 8 pled the case succinctly:

Opening a museum is not simply unlocking a door. Preparing a museum collection for opening usually requires at least one year of careful work, even in the best of circumstances. From a curatorial perspective, it takes many months to do this in a professional and responsible manner. The plan to open one of the world's most important museums in a period of two weeks displays a remarkable unawareness of cultural heritage management. The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities seems to be unaware that there are internationally acknowledged standards and disciplines of museology and cultural heritage management...The museums and

historical sites of Iraq should not fall victim to the political whim of the moment, and be sacrificed for the sake of a public relations campaign on behalf of government. They do not belong to the government but to the people of Iraq.

Their plea fell on deaf ears, as the triumphal headlines made clear, and the house of Iraq's ancient museum again became a propaganda instrument. It reveals how Nouri al-Maliki's government thinks about the museum's collection—as primarily a propaganda tool and economic resource, no longer an integral part of the nation's past.

But cultural destruction in Iraq was not



in the museum. This publicity stunt, organized on a rushed schedule, was a conservator's nightmare that endangered the safety of the artifacts. Nonetheless, it was hailed as a signal of stability and renewed sovereignty in Iraq. In reality, civil conflict in the country was kicking into overdrive. Not surprisingly, the gold soon embarked on a world publicity tour.

Al-Maliki seems to have learned an ugly lesson from the occupying powers. On a far grander scale—one that posed dangers of serious damage to far more of the collection—the grand opening of the museum on February 29 worked in the same way as the Nimrud gold exhibition. The decision to

bounded to museums and institutions in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Throughout the Fertile Crescent, looting has become a full-fledged industry. As in other countries with significant ancient sites, Iraq's hundreds of archaeological locations were protected by armed guards before the war. When L. Paul Bremer dissolved the armed forces with CPA Executive Order Number 2 in April 2003, those guards went home. Looters moved in immediately, for reasons easy to understand.

The looters in Mesopotamia are the area's farmers, impoverished by conditions of both the old regime and the current occupation. Much of their land was destroyed by Saddam's reclamation policies of the 80s and 90s, and today their products can no longer find a market, since occupation forces and international contractors do not purchase Iraqi produce. These men do not conceive of themselves as looters. In their minds, they "are lords of this land," and as a direct result, the owners of all its possessions, according to Joann Farchakh Bajjalay in "Will Mesopotamia Survive the War?" He writes, "In the same way, if they had been able, these people would not have hesitated to take control of the oil wells, because this is 'their land.'" (Significantly, oil facilities were the only ones prioritized by the CPA for protection by American forces.) As one looter described them to Bajjalay, "These are fields full of pottery that we come and dig up whenever we are broke... Perhaps we will find something with writings on it, and it's still intact, and that will be sold very fast for USA dollars."

Yet, the looting industry disturbs more than the material past. The antiquities dealers are becoming a major political force, controlling certain areas and acting as go-betweens between ethnic and religious groups. They provide protection and livelihood to the tribes and villages of the region, and they protect their interests with deadly force. When authorities have attempted to curb the looting, the results have been horrific. In 2005, eight customs agents were ambushed and murdered, their bodies burned and dumped in the desert, after they had seized a cache of artifacts and arrested several artifact hunters.

"How would it be possible to save the history of the world from the hands of looters?" Bajjalay asks. It is a good question, though her answer should give us pause. "Strict laws, economic alternatives and political approval and cooperation of the trib-

al leaders provide the only possible solution to this dilemma," Bajjalay writes. "Farming could provide a solution, particularly given that the majority of the looters are themselves farmers...Farming and industrial dairy products might replace the illicit excavation of antiquities as a major source of income for much of the rural population in Iraq." There is something dangerously naïve in championing a return to farming coupled with a stern law-and-order approach, as though Pandora's box could be closed so simply, and as though law enforcement in Iraq had the power to break the antiquities syndicates.

Perhaps there is another alternative that has so far escaped consideration. As Bajjalay notes, "By now, [the looters] know how to outline the walls of buried buildings and break directly into rooms and tombs where the objects, so prized on the world's antiquities markets, are to be found." The looters have become *de facto* archaeologists with real practical knowledge. If an economic incentive spurred them to work in excavating and preserving instead of looting and selling, this would not only preserve the treasures of Mesopotamia for the world, but also give the region's farmers a chance to see their own land as a real inheritance, not simply a meal ticket. Such a change would entail more than just innovative policy; it would require that archeological and academic communities begin to think of antiquities and artifacts as indissociable from the people on whose land they reside—cultural property that should benefit the people who possess it and for which reverence must be cultivated. It would mean that the past would cease to be an amalgamation of objects in our eyes and become, instead, a sustaining organ of the people—their economic and spiritual roots.

There continue to be many mysteries about American conduct during the war and occupation with respect to sites of cultural significance. The looting of Baghdad's museums, ministries and cultural institutions is one of the most infamous. Coalition manpower shortages of course

played a part but, as Ambassador Barbara Bodine explained when interviewed for the film *No End in Sight*, "the word came from Washington that...we're not going to stop the looting, we're not doing police work, that's not what we're here for." There is at least some logic here, though it tends

to fall apart when one considers that the Bush Administration was warned repeatedly and publicly before the war by top military commanders, notably General Eric Shinseki in a 2003 Congressional testimony, that "several hundred

thousand men" would be needed to secure the peace in Iraq. The invasion force ultimately comprised a paltry 160,000 troops, and even this was a substantial increase over what Rumsfeld had originally conceived under his rubric of 'maneuver warfare.' Quite simply, from the earliest stages of planning, US policy—whether by deliberate choice or sheer hubris and naïveté—promoted an atmosphere in which much of Iraq's past could be ground into dust, or broken up and sold for a quick buck.

More egregious, destructive and seemingly deliberate actions by the military have also endangered Iraq's cultural heritage. Take the ancient city of Babylon. The American military established its largest base in southern Iraq in the heart of Babylon's ruins in April 2003, immediately following the invasion. There, it built facilities and infrastructure for 2,000 soldiers, including a helicopter-landing pad blacktopped between the temple of Alexander the Great and the Palace of Nebuchadnezzar. Extensive site damage, including bulldozing, went largely unreported in the media, with the exception of Britain's *Guardian* newspaper. The damage is not only shocking but needless; the Army has never been able to articulate a reason why Babylon was chosen as a major base to begin with. Such explanations as have occasionally been offered prove flimsy, including the notion that occupation of the site effectively protected it from looters—a job that might have required a dozen men with guns, not 2,000 with bulldozers.

The base was finally closed at the end of 2004, but the damage had been done. The

Freedom is a practice of the spirit—it cannot be given, bought, or sold, and it never blossoms from the barrel of a gun.

United States, wittingly or not, has written itself into the history of the world's oldest places. When the people of the world visit the place of the world's birth, they will see its aborted offspring, industrial warfare, rotting upon it.

Under the most charitable interpretation, what happened at Babylon (and Ur, and half a dozen other sites in Iraq) was a prime case of American uprootedness in action, a total blindness to the importance of the past in building a future. At worst, it amounts to holding Iraq's culture hostage against the insurgency, in clear violation of the Hague Convention to which the United States is a signatory.

When Professor Bahrani visited Babylon and other important cultural sites in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, the frequent answer to her protests concerning American treatment of historic locations was: "Do you want us to risk the lives of soldiers to protect this site?"

to those sites persists before the eyes of the people, and the vacuum it leaves saps the spirit of the people and fuels the insurgency. In the long term, it costs more in blood and treasure to destroy these places than to protect them. Quite simply, practical military necessity has been and continues to be an excuse to commit atrocities and degradations that only further endanger the people they are intended to protect—the occupying soldiers.

In a peculiar way, Iraq particularly needs an ancient past because of its strange political history as a constructed nation. The British Protectorate of Iraq was cobbled together in 1920 out of the detritus of the Ottoman Empire, a political unit with no precedent in the previous past of the region. It incorporated Kurds, Bedouin tribes, and Sunni and Shi'a Arabs into a nation whose borders were drawn largely to serve the strategic purposes of the European

both environmental and archaeological—that slender resource will not be available to the spirits of the people as they struggle through what amounts to a second decolonization.

Uprootedness is a chilling spectre for Iraq's future, but the state of our souls, as the uprooters, also need to be tended. As Weil observed of the strange mechanics of rootless people, "Uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed, for it is a self-propagating one. [Uprooted nations] hurl themselves into some form of activity necessarily designed to uproot, often by the most violent methods, those who are not yet uprooted, or only partly so." This is no riddle, for only without the benefit of the past's nurture could one nation declare that it was seeking to bring freedom to another. Freedom is a practice of the spirit—it cannot be given, bought, or sold, and it

The base was finally closed at the end of 2004, but the damage had been done. The United States, wittingly or not, has written itself into the history of the world's oldest places.

Arguments for 'practical military necessity' colluded with many of the most foolish decisions of the period, including torture at Abu Ghraib. According to its own spokesman, the CPA "ranked protecting cultural property as priority number three," again in the name of practical military necessity. The myopia of such a position is shattering—a people deprived of their past has little reason to hope for its future, and too many reasons to turn to terrorism and insurgent warfare. In the short run, lives may be saved by leveling a mosque, or putting a sniper in a minaret, or building a base in an ancient ruin. But the damage done

powers through the endgame of their colonial chess match. Rebellion broke out in 1921, and violent power struggles dogged the Protectorate (the Hashemite Monarchy that was granted independence in 1932) and the Republic (as the subsequent military government was called), resulting finally in Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist near-totalitarianism. To the extent that Iraq has been able to search for national unity, its people have had to forge it from the beauty and majesty of their land and the stunning achievements of the past. Without some change in the way both Americans and Iraqis handle that cultural heritage—

never blossoms from the barrel of a gun. Restless and immature, cut loose from the political heritage to which we are heirs, we have fallen victim to a way of thinking divorced from the wisdom of experience, from our roots.

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a publication for people who read

Chuck and Friends

Schumerland and the future of the Democratic party

At a Columbia Political Union event last semester, Amy Klobuchar, Democratic Senator from Minnesota, was reminiscing about a Halloween costume she wore in high school. Her Purple Rain outfit inspired by musician Prince was great, Klobuchar explained, but she lost the costume contest to someone dressed as a bathroom wall. Klobuchar's legislative director, sitting in the front row, shook her head at the digression.

"No?" Klobuchar asked, turning to the staffer, who kept shaking her head. The Senator changed the subject. Moira Campion, the woman who intervened to avert the anecdote, is a former employee of New York Senator Chuck Schumer—a fact Klobuchar went out of her way to mention.

Schumer was head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), the Party organization that oversees Senate races, for the 2006 and 2008 election cycles. During his tenure, he brought Klobuchar and thirteen other new Democratic senators to Washington, raising his caucus from a 45-seat minority to a commanding 59-seat majority. (Assuming Al Franken's victory in Minnesota.)

pion. She is one of the myriad graduates from Schumer's office now ensconced in the upper echelons of Democratic politics.

Both as legislators and campaigners, Schumer and his staffers have shown an extraordinary ability to secure political victories. As a result, his ethos has permeated the party both through his leadership and the ubiquity of former staffers like Campion. But the same drive for victory that Schumer demands from himself and the cloud of people around him may be a liability for Democrats.

WELCOME TO SCHUMERLAND

And yet, at the height of the Democratic drive to wrest control from the Republicans, the value of his former staffers to the Party—always known in American politics as political operatives par excellence—rose higher than ever.

The rule of thumb, explained a former Schumer staffer, who requested anonymity, is "if they [potential hires] worked for Schumer, you should hire them on the spot."

Schumer's office operates as a farm team for the rest of the Party, and the reasons why are well understood. The Senator is known for selecting the best young talent. His indefatigable work ethic is legendary. He will call staffers to talk about news coverage well into the evening and call again soon after sunrise. Current spokesman Justin Vlasto answers 2,000 email messages a day

and carries two cell phones everywhere.

"He runs a tight ship," said ex-press intern Josh Stein. "It's a very intense office." Though demanding, Schumer is dedicated to his staff. He refers to his personnel as family, and he's not kidding—Schumer's wife is a former employee. As a result, his staff becomes a tight-knit group. "My experience has been that the employees bond together in the same way that soldiers bond through war," said a former staffer. This extended band of brothers and sisters refers to itself as 'Schumerland,' a term that has become common parlance throughout New York politics.

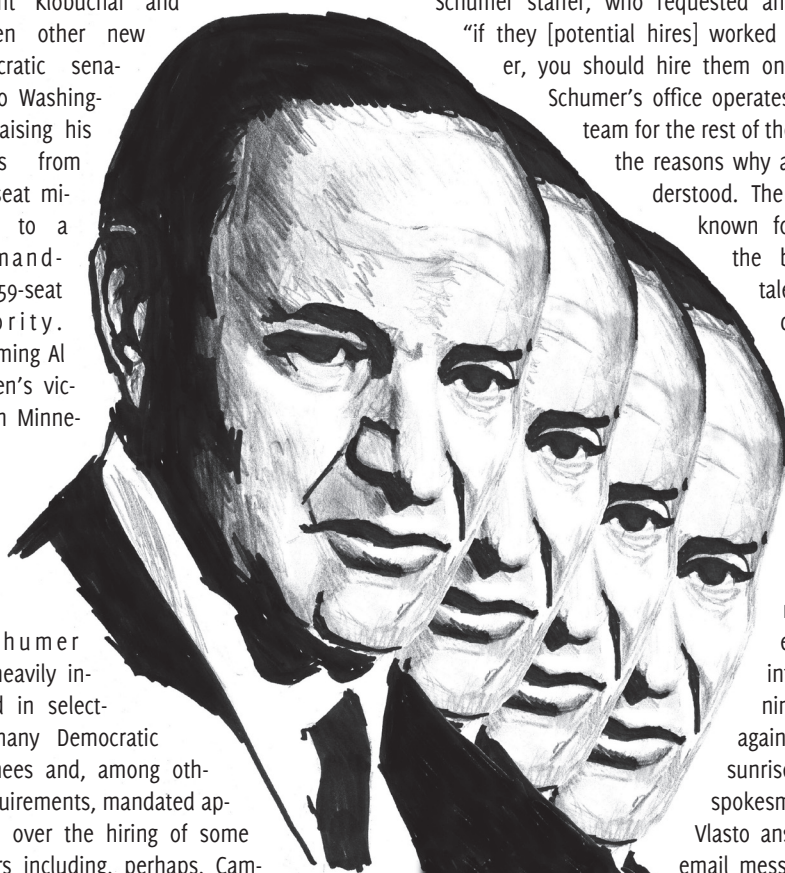
It is difficult to know to where the borders of Schumerland extend, but the available data is impressive. The chief spokesmen for State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, Governor Patterson and Mayor Bloomberg—the three most important figures in New York politics—were trained under Schumer. His alumni were all over Hillary Clinton's Presidential campaign, and at least five New York congressmen, as well as City Council speaker Quinn, have Schumer grads on their upper-level staff. Prospective mayoral candidate and current congressman Anthony Weiner was a Schumer protégé, and at least five state assemblymen, a state senator and a few City Councilmen were Schumer apprentices. Outside of New York, quasi-Senator Al Franken and Senator Barbara Boxer of California have employed Schumerites. These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg.

As the reach of his alumni has widened, Schumer has become one of the most powerful men in American politics. Officially, he is the vice chairman for the Senate Dems—the third ranking Senator in the party—but his influence is far greater than that title implies. He has a very close relationship with Majority Leader Harry Reid, whom he talks to four or five times every day. Schumer is also friendly with Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, whose intensity is often compared with that of the New York senator.

"I've talked to him a few times already," Mr. Schumer said to the *New York Observer* just five days after Emanuel was selected as Obama's Chief of Staff. "He is going to keep it focused. Rahm and I always get along and we think similarly in certain ways." And Sean Sweeney, a top Emmanuel

Cassie Spodak

Schumer was heavily involved in selecting many Democratic nominees and, among other requirements, mandated approval over the hiring of some staffers including, perhaps, Cam-



The rule of thumb, explained a former Schumer staffer, is “if they worked for Schumer, you should hire them on the spot.”

aide with a West Wing office, worked for Schumer. Schumer has also been a major legislative player, integral to the passage of countless landmark bills since he came to Washington as a congressman in 1980. While working on these national issues, he has remained focused on his constituents. In early February, he brokered a deal so that Drake's Cakes, a New York sweets company, could emerge from bankruptcy. His work saved about 200 city jobs. “The joke in the office was, if there were three people stuck waiting on line at a phone booth, we would send a representative to help them,” said former Schumer staffer and current State Assemblyman Alan Maisel in an interview with *CPR*.

That small-scale attention is classic Schumer, and his care for constituents has helped him remain as successful at home as he is within the Party. For his 2004 Senate reelection race, he garnered 71 percent of the vote—the least competitive race in New York statewide election history.

BUSINESS TIES

One reason Schumer has been so successful, both as a politician and a party operative, is his fundraising prowess. “He’s not afraid to hear no, and he won’t take no for an answer,” said a former staffer. Schumer has passed that tenacity onto others. In an interview with the *National Journal*, Senator Klobuchar recounted an incident where, during the early stages of her race, Schumer shook his finger in her face and commanded, “You’re going to raise one million in the first quarter.”

Wall Street has always been a fecund fundraising ground. During his term at the DSCC, Wall Street donations to the Committee increased by 50 percent—totaling four times the Wall Street money donated to Senate Republicans. As an individual, he has received more money from securities and investment firms than any other member of the Senate who has not run for President.

Funding from his business connections was vital to victories in 2006 and 2008, but they have left Schumer beholden to Wall Street firms—ironic in light of his recent book, *Positively American: Winning Back the Middle Class Majority One Family at a Time*. Before the economic collapse last year, Schumer, a powerful voice on financial issues due to his seat on the Banking Committee, was arguably the most pro-business Democrat in the Senate.

In 1997, he opposed new disclosure rules for derivatives, a form of financial asset whose loosely regulated trading precipitated the current economic crisis. He was a proponent of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act two years later, which removed

numerous Depression-era regulations on banks. The law allowed financial institutions to grow beyond what the law had previously permitted. The bill’s critics asserted that these oversized banks could be an economic hazard, since the failure of one of these institutions could cripple the economy and require government bailouts.

On business issues, Schumer was also often aligned with former Republican Senator Phil Gramm. Gramm, an economic advisor for the McCain campaign, was forced to resign from that post after he called America “a nation of whiners” for their kvetching about the economy. In the liberal investigative journal *Mother Jones*, Gramm was criticized for lucrative links with Enron before it went bust, and for pushing anti-regulatory legislation that may have fomented the subprime crisis. Schumer cosponsored a law with Gramm reducing capital taxes to the SEC and electricity deregulation legislation that greatly benefitted Enron. Schumer received nearly \$70,000 from Enron and their accounting firm Arthur Andersen for his first senate campaign in 1998.

As Wall Street money has flooded Democratic coffers, the Party and Schumer risk tarnishing their middle class image and adopting the pro-business reputation that has been a major liability for Republicans. Thanks to disgraced lawmakers like Governor Blagojevich, failed cabinet nominee Tom Daschle and a shoal of others, Democrats have already disherited the anti-corruption reputation vital to recent gains. In addition to expressing derision at the tarnish from these various scandals, Americans are unabashedly furious with the financial sector. With Democrats as the party of bank bailouts, which Schumer ardently advocated from the beginning, that anger could bolster Republican efforts to reclaim power.

POST-POST-PARTISANSHIP

Along with their pro-corporate image, Republicans have suffered from a reputation as virulently partisan, unwilling to work with Democrats and underhanded in their campaign tactics. These charges were exemplified by the advent of ‘Swift-boating’ advertisements in 2004. If his past is any indication, Schumer could bring about a similar view of Democrats, even though he trends Republican on business issues.

Before elections in 2006, Schumer berated the Bush administration for a port security deal with a Dubai-based company. Though such contracts are routine, Schumer made the deal a nationally covered issue, even holding a press conference with 9/11 families. The hullabaloo was a clear (and wildly successful) attack on Republicans as weak on foreign policy. Yet Schumer’s criticism, both

spurious and beneficial to big business, began after an American port company lobbied him to kill the contract.

Last year, in a move intended to play up financial troubles under Bush, Schumer sent a public letter to government regulators about IndyMac bank. In the letter, which his office provided to news publications, Schumer wrote that IndyMac “could face failure if prescriptive measures are not taken quickly.” The already struggling bank faced a spike in withdrawals after his letter and failed soon thereafter. The press release was by no means the primary reason why the bank fell, but Schumer may have hammered the last nail in IndyMac’s coffin. In August, what began as Schumer’s attempt to discredit Republicans ended with the California Attorney General considering an investigation of Schumer’s role in the meltdown.

Both of these slugs at Republicans during election years are a far cry from the age of Obama post-partisanship, and if Schumer and former staffers in other offices continue to employ similar tactics, it could limit the Democrats’ ability to appear more bipartisan than their predecessors in the majority.

SUBVERTING SCHUMERLAND

Schumer may have given up his DSCC chairmanship but, thanks to his connections to Reid, Rahm and his protégés, his political presence has expanded, especially in New York. Kirsten Gillibrand, who replaced Hillary Clinton as New York’s junior senator, wholeheartedly embraces Schumer’s mentorship. He has been instrumental in her “evolution” from conservative upstate representative to a far more liberal senator palatable to downstate Democrats, and at least one ex-Schumer staffer works in Gillibrand’s office.

The first inklings of Schumer-based attacks began last year. During his 2008 reelection campaign, Republican minority leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky released a video that made the rounds in the punditocracy attacking Schumer as a conniving outsider meddling in Kentucky politics.

As Schumer’s stock rises and other Democratic politicians find their hyper-political handlers shaking their heads at off-message remarks, Republicans could very well continue to exploit the Schumer persona to their advantage. If Democrats are not careful, the man instrumental to their recent Congressional gains could dismantle what he spent years building up.

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Labor Disunions

Bringing democracy back to the American workplace

The 2008 presidential election invigorated the American democratic process as never seen before. But the economic troubles facing the nation today reflect just how confined that process really is. Beneath a broken commercial and financial system beleaguered by the poor decisions of an unaccountable business elite lies an economic infrastructure bereft of workplace democracy—worker representation and worker bargaining power.

The past 30 years have seen the slow erosion of workers' rights in a context of falling or stagnant wages, inaccessible or inadequate health care coverage, and new extremes in wealth and poverty. The problems that have come into sharp focus over the past few months compel us to ask: can a country truly be called democratic if it achieves democracy only in the 'political' sphere?

SEPARATE SPHERES

Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor of American History at Columbia University, noted that American history is characterized by a separation of the political and economic realms guided by the philosophy of classical liberalism. "This very often means economic relations are seen as embodying that area where government should have as little intrusiveness as possible," he remarked in an interview.

How it is exactly that the workplace came under the hegemonic control of management in the early chapters of the nation's history remains a question open to interpretation, but what is clear is that the tradition is deep-rooted. The labor struggles of the 19th century resulted in extreme violence and unrest (more so in this country than in other industrialized

nations of the same period), often as they were put down brutally. In this sense, the absence of countervailing forces in the American workplace is not only the product of classical liberalist ideology, but also of business mobilization and "raw power."

But the old system came under sharp attack during the Great Depression. The weak foundation of US economic power had given way, and it took with it the entire national economic structure. 20th century liberalism came to embrace workplace democracy, higher wages, and better working conditions out of economic necessity. "The political establish-

ment accepted an explanation for the Depression in 'under-consumption,' explained Professor Foner. "The real problem was lack of purchasing power... American workers simply could not purchase the goods produced by American capitalism."

With the New Deal came the expansion of the federal government, which entered into the economic sphere as it never had before, emerging for the first time as an arbitrator ready to mediate between the competing claims of labor, business and farming. In 1935, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act), which enshrined basic workers' rights, at least in the private sector. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) was created as an independent agency of the US government, a body commissioned to oversee collective bargaining drives and establish federal union election procedures.

During the Great Depression, the US government responded to economic turmoil by expanding workplace democracy, granting US workers new rights that they were eager to exercise. By the year 1950, 33 percent of the private workforce was unionized.

Today, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that figure stands at a mere 12.5

percent, although recent polls conducted by the Center for American Progress Action Fund indicate that as many as 58 percent of workers would join a union if they could. The history of the fall of a large unionized workforce is vast and complex, as is the scholarly analysis of it, but contributing factors include the Cold War, the growth of corporate power, and the shift toward a service sector economy. Regressive laws, such as the Taft Hartley Act of 1948, have created especially robust obstacles to union growth. And even when federal law protects workers' rights, corporate powers have found ways to exploit the safeguards still in place. Perhaps nothing demonstrates this better than the usurpation of NLRB union election procedures by employers and management.

A LOOK AT NLRB ELECTIONS: COERCION AND LEGAL MALFEASANCE

It is widespread knowledge among those who study American labor policy that union election standards, which are generally overseen by the National Labor Relations Board, do not even closely resemble those we hold for democratic elections in the political sphere.

Business owners have been able to exploit the cumbersome and inefficient guidelines of the NLRB election process, favoring their interests above anything that might be called fair representation. Political scientists like Gordon Lafer have noted that this is accomplished through outright coercion, as well as other, subtler techniques, such as depriving workers of valuable information and delaying election procedure. These trends call for an overhaul of NLRB election procedures if union elections are ever to be truly democratic.

The exact process of NLRB elections is so punctuated and complex (an obstacle to unionization in and of itself) that a full description of it would be excessive here. Briefly though, it requires that 30 percent of the workers at a worksite sign a petition calling for a union election, the date of which must be set by the NLRB. It is then followed by an appeals period, a campaigning period, and fi-

Labor laws are broken every 23 minutes, according to a project of the Institute for America's Future.

nally the election and post-election appeals period.

Coercion runs rampant throughout the entire process: Kate Brofenbrenner of Cornell University estimates that one quarter of all employers illegally fire at least one employee during union campaigns. In absolute figures, the NLRB stated that in 2005, 31,000 workers were illegally disciplined or fired for union activity. Intimidation has become routine.

Although illicit abuse is common enough, loopholes in the framework of NLRB elections allow employers to commit malfeasance through more legal means. Gordon Lafer of the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon reports that an employer may legally oblige workers to meet one-on-one with a supervisor, who may then gauge which way any one worker will vote. In these meetings, workers are compelled to discuss their views with the individual most responsible for their pay, hours, benefits, and job stability. Lafer notes that workers commonly report receiving illegal threats during these meetings. The meetings are one example of voter intimidation, but beyond that, they also effectively eliminate the secret ballot process.

The frequency and ubiquity of "Unfair Labor Practices" (ULPs) as described above is also the result of the lack of institutionalized punishment for unlawful employers. The process of seeking legal recourse for an unlawful firing is so long and arduous, while lawyer fees often cost more than a worker can afford. Winning a court case against an employer with greater legal counsel is likely to be an uphill battle. According to the think tank American Rights at Work, between the years 2000 and 2005, only 40 percent of the 19,000 ULP cases litigated resulted in the NLRB issuing a complaint or overseeing a settlement between the two par-

ties.

Even after all of this, if an employer is found guilty, the punishment is minimal. The employer is required simply to rehire the worker, and, in a few instances, pay back lost salary. The employer will not lose his license, and the absence of any fines or serious punitive action seems almost to invite abuse. A legal framework that virtually rewards illegal firing has ensured that ULPs remain a mainstay of every union election. Labor laws are broken every 23 minutes, according to a project of the Institute for America's Future.

Another major flaw in the union election process is the monopoly that employers hold over the information available to workers. Union organizers are not granted access to the worksite during campaigning while workers can only meet on their lunch breaks or after hours. A federal commission found that 10,000 employees are punished every year for engaging in pro-union speech at a workplace. As a result, workers must organize on their own free time, at inconvenient, often out-of-the-way locations—an obvious obstacle, especially given the demands already placed on workers' time.

By contrast, employers may legally force workers to attend mass anti-union meetings, what we might call "captive audience" speeches. According to Lafer's report, the strategy that was used in nearly 92 percent of all union drives of the 90s). Given the barriers that workers and union organizers face daily, these measures amount to near total control of information. During political elections, we expect that the media will not be controlled by any one party, and that citizens will be given free access to information on the merits of all or both candidates. Why shouldn't union elections be subject to the same standards?

Finally, union elections are rarely carried out in a timely fashion, giving employers both the room and the means to exploit NLRB proceedings. Before the NLRB decides a date for the election, employers must agree on which employees are eligible for unionization. This allows the employer to stonewall even the beginning of an election for an indefinite period of time. Evidence demonstrates that the longer an election drags on, the less likely workers are to vote for a union. Perhaps most distressingly, after an election,

an employer can appeal the results and *negate* what the majority decided, as if the election had never even happened.

SEEKING REMEDY?

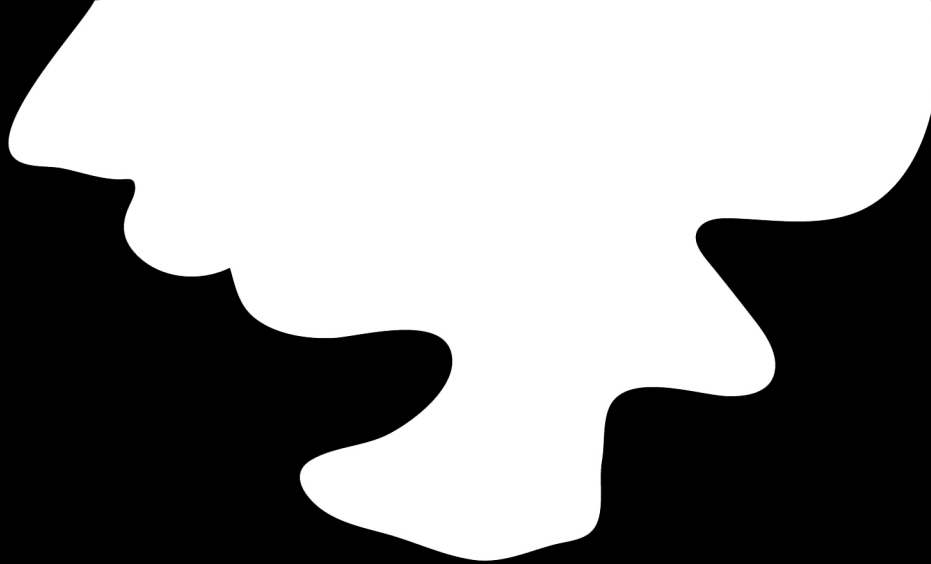
Although most scholars who study US union elections agree that the process does not even come close to meeting the standards held for democratic political elections, few if any offer tangible suggestions for remedying the procedures. One solution that different employee groups have pursued themselves is to reject the NLRB entirely in favor of the "Card Check" system, a streamlined process of majority sign-up that bypasses NLRB election procedures. Card Check is the essence of the Employee Free Choice Act, a bill that passed in the House in 2007 but currently remains stuck in the Senate due to a Republican filibuster.

Still, simple solutions exist even within the current NLRB framework. Heavier fines imposed on guilty employers would help reduce the high incidence of workplace coercion. To this same end, the legal process by which workers can seek recompense needs to be reformed. In cases of illegal firing, for instance, the burden of proof should fall on the employer rather than the worker, as is it does in sexual harassment suits. Campaign organizers should be granted access to the worksite, while employees should be allowed to freely discuss the merits of unionization with their coworkers at onsite locations. These measures are necessary to guarantee that workers receive the information necessary for them to make educated voting decisions. And to ensure timely election proceedings, it should be the NLRB, rather than the employer, who decides which workers are eligible for unionization. Finally, union election results should remain in place (with or without union representation), even if one party decides to appeal the outcome.

But what is needed most of all is a renewal of work life in America. This comes through the understanding that democracy does not end in the political sphere. It must extend to the millions of workplaces where employees are not yet considered citizens, or even people, but rather treated as commodities in the process of production. This is an issue of workers and management, labor and capital. But more fundamentally, it is an issue of democracy and the lack of it in the daily lives of most American workers.

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COLUMBIA POLITICAL REVIEW