

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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January, 2018

Apologies for this tardiness – vicious viruses (that’s right, plural) on 56th Street. Anyway, season’s greetings to you and all you love (see below). Herein we consider cake and its politics, secular comfort, humanism as fiction, humanist activism right here in Gotham, and what a difference \$5 billion can make. We welcome a new Board member, consult Brooks on democracy and MLK, Jr. on unconditional love – as we watch the gathering net of truth tighten around our Liar in Chief. –JR

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## HAPPY NEW YEAR! NO, REALLY!

Steven R. Quartz

**Neuroscientist; Prof of Philo, Caltech; Co-author, Cool**  
(Excerpted from “The State Of The World Isn’t Nearly As Bad As You Think”, [www.edge.org/response-detail/26669](http://www.edge.org/response-detail/26669))

About two-thirds of Americans believe the number of people living in extreme poverty has doubled in the last 20 years. People point to conflicts in the Middle East, the retreat of democracy, plummeting human rights, and an overall global decline of wellbeing. Yet the news from social science ... belies this declinist worldview.

In reality, extreme poverty has nearly halved in the last twenty years—about a billion people have escaped it. Material wellbeing—income, declines in infant mortality, increases in life expectancy, educational access—has increased at its greatest pace during the last few decades. The number of democracies in developing nations has tripled since the 1980s, while the number of people killed in armed conflicts has decreased by 75 percent.

I want to suggest three reasons why I think [this] is such important scientific news. First, while these long-term trends may not resuscitate an old-fashioned notion of progress—certainly not one suggesting that history possesses intrinsic directionality—they do call out for a better understanding (and recognition) of the technological and cultural dynamics driving long-term patterns of historical change. What is even more intriguing to me is their stark demonstration of how deeply our cognitive and emotional biases distort our worldview. In particular, we have good evidence that we don’t remember the past as it was. Instead, we systematically edit it, typically omitting the bad and highlighting the good, leading to cognitive biases, such as “rosy retrospection”.

At the cultural level, these biases make us biologically vulnerable to declinist narratives. From Pope Francis’ anti-

modernist encyclical to Capitalism’s inevitable death by internal contradictions and tales of moral decline, declinist narratives intuitively resonate with our cognitive biases. They thus ... make it easy to lose sight of the fact that until a few centuries ago the world’s population was stuck in abject poverty, a subsistence-level Malthusian trap of dreary cycles of population growth and famine.

In reality, not only has material wellbeing increased around the globe, global inequality is also decreasing as a result of technological and cultural innovations driving globalization. We should be particularly on guard against declinist narratives that also trigger our emotional biases. These alarmist narratives identify an immediate or imminent threat, a harbinger of decline, which unconsciously triggers the amygdala and initiates a cascade of brain chemicals ... creating both primal visceral feelings of dread and locking in our attention to that narrative, effectively shutting down rational appraisal.

Much of what counts as “news” today involves such narratives. The combination of an ever-shortening news cycle, near instantaneous communications, fragmented markets, heightened competition for viewership, and our cognitive and emotional biases conspire to make it all but inevitable that these narratives would dominate and make it prohibitive to grasp the progressive themes.

The result is today’s dominant alarmist and declinist news cycle that’s essentially a random walk from moral panic to moral panic. To appreciate the real news—that by many fundamental measures the state of the world is improving—thus requires an exercise in cognitive control, allowing a rational appraisal of scientifically informed data. The most important scientific news to me is that the broad historical trajectory of human societies provides a powerful counter-narrative to today’s dominant declinist worldview.

*Comment: So lighten up, people – Happy New Year! – JR*

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## LET'S TALK ABOUT THE GAY WEDDING CAKE

John Rafferty

Let's start with the simple facts. As David Brooks began his OpEd piece ("How Not to Advance Gay Marriage") in *The Times* December 4:

"Five years ago, Charlie Craig and David Mullins walked into a bakery in a strip mall in Lakewood, Colo., to ask about a cake for their wedding. The baker, Jack Phillips, replied: 'I'll make you birthday cakes, shower cakes, cookies, brownies. I just can't make a cake for a same-sex wedding.'

"As Adam Liptak of *The Times* reported, Phillips is a Christian and believes that the Bible teaches that marriage is between a man and a woman. Phillips is not trying to restrict gay marriage or gay rights; he's simply asking not to be forced to take part."

Furthermore, Phillips calls himself a "cake artist", that his cakes are artistic expressions - and so claims both the free exercise of religion clause *and* the free speech clause of the First Amendment to protect him from the Colorado Civil Rights Commission's contention that he violated state law against sexual-orientation discrimination.

Okay, but as equally-conservative George Will, in his December 1 Washington Post OpEd ("A cake is food, not speech. But why bully the baker"), pointed out:

"Phillips was neither asked nor required to attend, let alone participate in, the wedding. Same-sex marriage was not yet legal in Colorado, so Craig and Mullins were to be married in Massachusetts. The cake was for a subsequent reception in Denver. But even if the cake were to have been consumed at a wedding, Phillips's creation of the cake before the ceremony would not have constituted participation in any meaningful sense.

"The 'public accommodations' section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act ... established the principle that those who open their doors for business must serve all who enter. That principle would become quite porous were it suspended whenever someone claimed his or her conduct was speech expressing an idea and therefore created a constitutional exemption from a valid and neutral law of general applicability."

Both Brooks and Will wish this thing had never gone to court. Brooks fantasizes about some non-litigious, "neighborly" version of America in which Craig and Mullins invite Phillips to their home, bake together, and all get to know one another. But, he says,

"The legal course, by contrast, was to take the problem out of the neighborhood and throw it into the court system. The legal course has some advantages. You can use state power, ultimately the barrel of a gun, to compel people to do what you think is right. There are clearly many cases in which the legal course is the right response (*Brown v. Board of Education*).

"But the legal course has some disadvantages. It is inherently adversarial. It takes what could be a conversation and turns it into a confrontation. It is dehumanizing. It ends persuasion and relies on the threat of state coercion. It is elitist. It takes a situation that could be addressed concretely

on the ground and throws it up, as this one now has been, to the Supreme Court, where it will be decided by a group of Harvard and Yale law grads."

And Will, too, laments the real-world fallout from Craig's and Mullins's recourse to the legal system.

"Denver has many bakers who, not having Phillips's scruples, would have unhesitatingly supplied the cake they desired. So, it was not necessary for Craig's and Mullins's satisfaction as consumers to submit Phillips to government coercion. Evidently, however, it was necessary for their satisfaction as asserters of their rights as a same-sex couple.

"To make his vocation compatible with his convictions and Colorado law, Phillips has stopped making wedding cakes, which was his principal pleasure and 40 percent of his business. He now has only four employees, down from ten. Craig and Mullins, who have caused him serious financial loss and emotional distress, might be feeling virtuous for having done so. But siccing the government on him was nasty. ...

"Phillips ought to lose this case. But Craig and Mullins, who sought his punishment, have behaved abominably."

*On the other hand ...*

Amanda Marcotte, a feminist blogger who has several times been represented in these pages, in her salon.com post ("'Gay wedding cake' case poses a major threat to civil rights") December 4, wrote:

"The bully here is clearly Phillips, who used religion as an excuse to demean a couple on what was supposed to be an exciting day of celebration. Now he's party to a lawsuit that, if he wins, could open the door to people being turned away from clothing stores, restaurants, music venues or any other private business that could arguably offer 'expressive' services, simply because the owners would like to express disapproval of who those people are."

She quotes Louise Melling, the Director of the ACLU's Center for Liberty, that, "What's perfectly clear here is that the bakery needed to know the identity of the couple here to make that decision - that the bakery refused service once it learned who wanted the cake, and that it was a same-sex couple."

But Jack Phillips *did* know the identity of the couple in front of him in his bake shop, and did *not* refuse David Mullins and Charles Craig service because of who they are. And in fact offered to bake these gay men "birthday cakes, shower cakes, cookies, brownies". He just didn't want to participate in a gay wedding.

As much as I wish Jack Phillips thought otherwise, as much as my humanist sensibility (and Ms. Marcotte's) abhors his backward-thinking, blinkered Christianity, as much as I want to help LGBTs however I can, I cannot stop my old-fashioned liberalism from whispering in my ear: "*Why not leave the baker the f\*\*k alone?*"

Okay, what do *you* think? Send your opinions, long form or short, to editor@shsn.org.

And come to our free-for-all discussion: "Let's Talk About the Gay Wedding Cake", at Brunch, Sunday, January 21, 11:30 am, at Stone Creek Bar & Lounge, 140 East 27 St.

## THE GLORY OF DEMOCRACY

David Brooks

(Reprinted from The New York Times, 12/14/2017)

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and Communism fell with it. Liberal democracy seemed triumphant. Democracies sprouted in Central Europe. Apartheid fell in South Africa. The Oslo process seemed to herald peace in the Middle East.

Then it all went bad. Tribalism and authoritarianism are now on the march while the number of democracies declines. Far worse has been the degradation of democracies, especially in our own country. The Congress barely functions. We have a president who ignores facts and violates basic decency. On college campuses, according to a Brookings/UCLA survey, 50 percent of students believe that “offensive” speech should be shouted down and 20 percent believe it should be violently crushed.

In short, we used to have a certain framework of decency within which we held our debates, and somehow we’ve lost our framework. We took our liberal democratic values for granted for so long, we’ve forgotten how to defend them. We have become democrats by habit and no longer defend our system with a fervent faith.

So over the next few months I’m going to use this column, from time to time, to go back to first principles, to go over the canon of liberal democracy — the thinkers who explained our system and why it is great.

I’m going to start with Thomas Mann’s *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. Mann, possibly the greatest novelist of his era, fled the Nazis and came to America. In 1938, he gave a series of lectures against fascism, Communism and the America Firsters.

Democracy begins with one great truth, he argued: the infinite dignity of individual men and women. Man is made in God’s image. Unlike other animals, humans are morally responsible. Yes, humans do beastly things — Mann had just escaped the Nazis — but humans are the only creatures who can understand and seek justice, freedom and truth. This trinity “is a complex of an indivisible kind, freighted with spirituality and elementary dynamic force.”

“Man is nature’s fall from grace, only it is not a fall, but just as positively an elevation as conscience is higher than innocence,” he writes. Original sin “is the deep feeling of man as a spiritual being for his natural infirmities and limitations, above which he raises himself through spirit.”

Democracy, Mann continues, is the only system built on respect for the infinite dignity of each individual man and woman, on each person’s moral striving for freedom, justice and truth. It would be a great error to think of and teach democracy as a procedural or political system, or as the principle of majority rule.

It is a “spiritual and moral possession.” It is not just rules; it is a way of life. It encourages everybody to make the best of their capacities — holds that we have a moral responsibility to do so. It encourages the artist to seek beauty, the neighbor to seek community, the psychologist to seek perception, the scientist to seek truth.

Monarchies produce great paintings, but democracy teaches citizens to put their art into action, to take their creative impulses and build a world around them. “Democracy is thought; but it is thought related to life and action.” Democratic citizens are not just dreaming; they are thinkers who sit on the town council. He quotes the philosopher Bergson’s dictum: “Act as men of thought, think as men of action.”

In his day, as in ours, democracy had enemies and the prospects could look grim. Mann argued that the enemies of democracy aren’t just fascists with guns. They are anybody who willfully degrades the public square — the propagandists and demagogues. “They despise the masses ... while they make themselves the mouthpiece of vulgar opinion.” They offer bread and circuses, tweets and insults, but have nothing but a “rabbit horizon” — all they see is the grubby striving for money and power and attention.

The authoritarians and the demagogues subjugate action through bullying and they subjugate thought by arousing mob psychology. “This is the contempt of pure reason, the denial and violation of truth in favor of power and the interests of the state, the appeal to the lower instincts, to so-called ‘feeling,’ the release of stupidity and evil from the discipline of reason and intelligence.”

They possess the “kind of contempt which strives with all its might to degrade and corrupt humanity in order to force the people to do its will.”

Mann has confidence in democracy’s ultimate victory because he has confidence in democracy’s ability to renew itself, to “put aside the habit of taking itself for granted.”

Renewal means reform. He calls for economic and political reform that, quoting a French deputy, “will create a true hierarchy of values, put money in the service of production, production in the service of humanity, and humanity itself in the service of an ideal which gives meaning to life.”

Mann’s great contribution is to remind us that democracy is not just about politics; it’s about the individual’s daily struggle to be better and nobler and to resist the cheap and the superficial. Democrats like Mann hold up a lofty image of human flourishing. They inspire a great yearning to live up to it.

*Comment: For another view of the authoritarians and demagogues, the pigs at the trough who threaten our democracy today, turn the page to Jon Engel’s essay. — JR*

### BEST LINE OF THE MONTH

*Ed Buckner posted this on Facebook Dec 11.*

From Jerry Coyne, not with a joke but with a painful funny, we wind up with a really good story, from one Daniel Seidemann:

*My ailing father — 93 years old, a victim and defeater of Nazism, a right-wing Orthodox Jew — was asked by the physician in the emergency room, seeking to ascertain his cognitive state:*

*“Who’s the President?”*

*My dad: “You don’t want to know.”*  
Jeez, I love my dad.

## WHAT CAN YOU BUY WITH \$10 BILLION THAT YOU CAN'T BUY WITH \$5 BILLION?

Jonathan Engel

It is clear at this point that the Republican tax bill will have the (intended) result of further enriching the already super-rich and hurting everyone else. No doubt for some Republicans, such as the Ayn Rand acolyte Paul Ryan, this is a philosophical matter. Ryan and his ilk believe that the Gilded Age in America in the late 1800s didn't go far enough in exalting the obscenely wealthy and degrading everyone else. But to the rest of the Republicans (and the true believers are part of this too) the reason they push this "tax reform" is simple: their ultra-rich mega-donors demand it.

All polls show that the American people are firmly against what the G.O.P. is doing to the tax code, but the donors made it clear to their Republican minions that the political donation spigot would be turned off if a tax bill to their liking wasn't passed, and so the Republicans dutifully fell in line. But what of these mega-donors themselves? As a person who has been right around middle class all his life, it's hard for me to see their motivation. Why would a person care about owning more cars than they can drive and more homes than they can live in?

In other words, what can you buy with \$10 billion that you can't buy with \$5 billion?

Not to belittle the motivation of pure avarice and money for money's sake, but I think what these titans of industry really want is power. The Koch brothers and their fellow billionaire bastards (including the president, if he really is a billionaire) want to turn this country into an oligarchy where they and their progeny wield absolute power for decades and even centuries to come. None of this democracy crap where elected officials represent the will and needs of the people. Oh no, not for them. They paid for these Republican senators and congressmen and goddammit, they're going to reap the benefits of their largesse or there will be hell to pay, you better believe it.

So what, exactly, is it that you can buy with ten billion that you can't buy with five? It turns out that the answer to that question is: a country.

And not just any old country, but that light unto nations, the United States of America, which now, evidently, is up for sale to the highest bidder. Thanks Citizens United!

But before the 1 percent (really the .0001%) start celebrating too hard, they should consider this quote from the late Sir Terry Pratchett in his book *Snuff*:

*"What should we do when the highborn and wealthy take to crime? Indeed, if a poor man will spend a year in prison for stealing out of hunger, how high would the gallows need to be to hang the rich man who steals out of greed?"*

There is a rumor going around that I have found God. I think this is unlikely because I have enough difficulty finding my keys, and there is empirical evidence that they exist. – Terry Pratchett

## CAN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE TRUMP'S REIGN OF LIES?

Rob Boston

(Reprinted from *TheHumanist.com*, December/January issue, and forwarded here by Giddian Beer. Rob Boston is director of communication at Americans United for Separation of Church and State.)

My mother was a fan of Simon and Garfunkel, and I grew up hearing a lot of their music. I came to appreciate the folksy duo as well.

One of my favorite songs by the duo is "The Boxer". I've interpreted the tune as mostly a rumination on the loneliness and alienation emanating from the cold and unforgiving streets of New York City, but there's one line that, especially in light of our current political situation, seems to say something deeper. It's a line that has been coming back to me a lot these days:

*All lies and jests!*

*Still a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.*

I often think of this line when I scan news headlines. It came to me recently as I read a story in Politico about a reporter's visit to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a city not far from where I grew up. The reporter talked to a number of people who had voted for Donald Trump in an effort to determine if any of them were disillusioned in light of Trump's glaring incompetence.

The reporter quickly learned that these people still love Trump. They think he's doing a great job, and they're convinced that any problems he may be having can be laid at the feet of the media, which is laboring to make him look bad. (As if he needed any help!)

I was struck by the fact that many of these people simply have no idea what's going on. One man complained about how often President Barack Obama had played golf. When the reporter told him that Trump plays even more frequently, the fellow was momentarily flummoxed but quickly rebounded to say that's all right because Trump works harder than any other president whereas Obama slept until noon each day.

Neo-Nazis are marching in the streets of major cities. Anti-vaccination cranks have made diseases like measles and whooping cough a real threat again. Around the country, groups of people are meeting to debunk the "conspiracy" that the Earth is round. People are denying climate change, even as glaciers continue to melt. A pedophile ran for US Senate in Alabama and nearly won.

Has the country lost its collective mind?

One of the most frustrating—and sad—things about modern life is that we've never had easier access to information, yet many people choose to remain ignorant. The rise of the internet has taught us that wider access to information alone doesn't change things. After all, the same internet that can turn you on to Plutarch, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Percy Bysshe Shelley can lead you down a rabbit hole for kooks who believe the moon landing was a hoax.

## SHARIF RAHMAN JOINS THE BOARD OF SHSNY

At a November 28 meeting of the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, Sharif Rahman was elected to the Board unanimously.



Born in Bangladesh, Sharif came to the U.S. to study at CUNY to become an Occupational Therapy Assistant, but his plans were derailed when, in December, 1995, a drunk driving in the wrong lane on a highway in New Jersey put Sharif in hospital to undergo brain surgery, years of rehabilitation, neurological impairments, learning disabilities, and a formal declaration of disability by the Social Security Administration.

But Sharif went back to school, impairments and all, completed a certificate program at Medgar Evers College, then his Bachelor's degree in Disability Studies from CUNY, and went straight to work helping others as a Disability Hearing Representative for United Secular Disability Center.

Secular? Oh, yes.

"I became a skeptic while I was a child in Bangladesh. At age 13, I became a hopeless agnostic-atheist. As a secular humanist, I formed an organization called Center for Secular Living, Inc. I am also the father of a child of 14 who considers herself secular although her mother is a Muslim. My mother is religious, too, but both my spouse and mother do not ask me about my personal faith or choices. Although we had marital conflicts that resulted in a long separation, I am back with my immediate family in Princeton, NJ, while commuting to USDC.

"In addition to SHSNY, I am member of several other secular organizations. I want to promote tolerance, respect and acceptance among believers and non-believers, and in co-existence and the avoidance of conflict."

## THOUGHTS FOR MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY

Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.

Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic resources. With this system, a small privileged few are rich beyond conscience, and almost all others are doomed to be poor at some level. That's the way the system works. And since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality ... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

Humanists, of course, are not immune to this. We're all susceptible to confirmation bias, but I have to say, based on what I've been reading about Trump supporters since the election, no one can touch them when it comes to being delusional. They have chosen a state of willful ignorance over living in the reality-based community.

The president routinely sticks his foot in his mouth and behaves like a petulant twelve-year-old on Twitter. Evidence continues to mount of his administration's unsavory ties to the Russians. Members of his own party have questioned his sanity. He relentlessly pursues policies that seemed designed to shaft his working-class base.

And none of this matters to the true believers.

It's alarming that this mindset affects public policy – and believe me, it does. Trump's administration is riddled with people who dismiss climate change, reject the health benefits of birth control, and cling to the idea that tax cuts for the rich will trickle down to boost the fortunes of the poor, among other things.

What's more horrifying about Trump's "post-truth" age of politics is that it has set a new low in political benchmarks. Many political analysts believe our nation will be left grappling with the repercussions of "Trumpism" long after he has left office. Sadly, they are probably right.

The American people have never considered politicians to be especially truthful, but Trump has taken us into uncharted waters here. In the past, a political leader who insisted that the sky is chartreuse when anyone could see that it's blue would have been considered deranged or a liar. Trump says things like this all of the time – and his followers simply aren't fazed. They're likely to crane their necks and say they can see the chartreuse sky as well.

Furthermore, Trump lies when he doesn't have to. Other politicians tell whoppers to get out of a tight situation or to further a political agenda. Not Trump. He lies when it simply makes no sense to lie, when the lie is easily debunked.

Again, Trump's fans just yawn. If this were a fringe group, we could perhaps yawn back. But 63 million Americans voted to make this man the leader of the free world. So far, there is precious little evidence that they're experiencing buyer's remorse in any significant numbers.

Those of us who've monitored religious right groups are accustomed to this attitude. We're used to dealing with people who assert, against all available evidence, that the United States was officially founded to be a "Christian nation" and that the Earth is only 6,000 years old. That sort of thing was to be expected from fundamentalist religious zealots who long ago decided to elevate belief over fact.

It now seems to be the preferred method of thinking for millions of Americans who aren't necessarily connected to the religious right. For them, opinions are just as good as facts, and beliefs don't have to be reevaluated in light of new information.

Can a democracy exist when millions of people have adopted the attitude that inconvenient truths need not be heeded and, in fact, may not be truths at all? Disturbingly, we are likely on the verge of finding out.

# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - FEBRUARY, 2018

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 4, 7-8:30 pm  
*Cancelled - Winter Storm*

THURS, FEB 1, 7-8:30 pm  
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH  
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

### **THE EVANGELICALS:**

*The Struggle to Shape America*  
Frances FitzGerald

This National Book Award finalist from Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Frances FitzGerald is the first to tell the powerful, dramatic story of the Evangelical movement in America — from the Puritan era to the 2016 presidential election.



The evangelical movement began in the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, known in America as the Great Awakenings. A populist rebellion against the established churches, it became the dominant religious force in the country.

Evangelicals have in many ways defined the nation. They have shaped our culture and our politics. Frances FitzGerald's narrative of this distinctively American movement is a major work of history, piecing together the centuries-long story for the first time.

"We have long needed a fair-minded overview of this vitally important religious sensibility, and FitzGerald has now provided it." (The New York Times Book Review)

— Paperback and Kindle available.

*Join us even if you haven't finished reading.*

*The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MARCH 1, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York

### **THE ECONOMIC SINGULARITY:**

*Artificial Intelligence and the Death of Capitalism*  
Calum Chance

This new book from best-selling AI writer Calum Chance argues that within a few decades, most humans will not be able to work for money. Self-driving cars will probably be the canary in the coal mine, providing a wake-up call for everyone who isn't yet paying attention. All jobs will be affected, from fast food McJobs to lawyers and journalists.

This is the single most important development facing humanity in the first half of the 21st century.

— Paperback and Kindle available.

### **Celebrate!**

## **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DAY January 16**

Written by Thomas Jefferson and passed by the Virginia legislature in 1786, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom is regarded as the precursor of the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Here's the gist of the statute:

"No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry, whatever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

## SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

### **YOUR IDEAS, PLEASE!**

Attendance has dwindled to single digits, so we're pulling the plug on Movie Night. The problem? Probably that 1-1/2- to 2-hour movies do not leave enough time for conversation. The discussion-rich Book Club, Brunch, and Great Lectures all thrive, and what they have in common is lots and lots of talk, opinion, controversy and fun. So 11-year-old Movie Night goes the way of the Betamax, to be replaced by ...

What's *your* idea? For a monthly weeknight social/food-and-drink/get-together format. At Stone Creek or anywhere. Ideas, please, to editor@shsny.org.

## **BRUNCH & CONVERSATION**

**SUN, JAN 21, 11:30 am**

**Back to Stone Creek!**

**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves**

Gemini Diner was nice but we couldn't hear each

other. And the Dallas Cowboys season is over, so back to Stone Creek. Come join

20 or more fellow freethinkers for food, fun and convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

*After-Brunch Discussion:*

*Let's talk about the Gay Wedding Cake.*



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## **MEET US ON MEETUP**

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## **TEXT US ON TWITTER**

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# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - FEBRUARY, 2018

## GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, JAN 31, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves-

**THE SON ALSO RISES:  
Surnames and the History of  
Social Mobility**  
Dr. Gregory Clark

How much of our fate is tied to the status of our parents and grandparents? How much does this influence our children? Using a novel technique—tracking family names over generations to measure social mobility across countries and periods—renowned economic historian Gregory Clark discovers that mobility rates are lower than conventionally estimated, do not vary across societies, and are resistant to social policies. The good news is that these patterns are driven by strong inheritance of abilities and that lineage does not beget unwarranted advantage. The bad news is that much of our fate is predictable from lineage. Clark argues that since a greater part of our place in the world is predetermined, we must avoid creating winner take all societies,



## STUDYING HUMANISM

*To My Fellow Humanist Scholars:*

My month-long bout with two different viruses made study and planning near-impossible (*vide* this very late newsletter), so I'm taking another month off from Studying Humanism. Please bear with me, and watch your Inbox for news of a February meeting.

— John Rafferty

*Book Now:*

**The SHSNY 10th Annual Darwin Day Celebration**

**Friday, February 9, 6:30 – 9:30 pm**

**The Storehouse Restaurant, 69 West 23 Street**

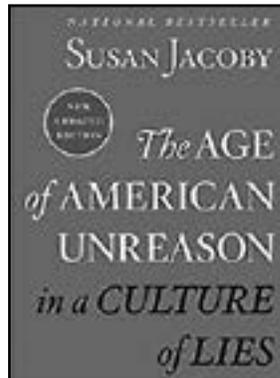
**Distinguished Guest Speaker:**

**SUSAN JACOBY**

... who will introduce and read from the just-published

*New Edition* of her NYTimes Best-Seller

***The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies***



Confirm your place today at our celebration of Charles Darwin's 209th birthday – and the 30th Anniversary of the founding of SHSNY – along with 50 or more of your fellow and sororal freethinkers at conveniently-midtown classic Irish pub, The Storehouse.

The highlight of the evening will be a talk and reading by nationally-acclaimed freethought author and speaker – and SHSNY Honorary Member – Susan Jacoby, on her *The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies*, “a prescient and now-classic analysis of the forces of anti-intellectualism in contemporary American life—updated for the era of Trump, Twitter, Breitbart and fake news controversies.”

It's going to be a great evening ... centered on a lavish Pub-Grub menu (veggie choices, of course) in our own upstairs private room, with our own cash bar ... mingling with old friends and making new friends ... and enjoying a fascinating and important presentation, all for ...

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## **The Humanist Activist**

### **VOLUNTEER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL GOOD**

**Donna Marxer**

If you want to *do something* to help offset the miseries of current times—something more than arguing politics and writing letters—and if you have a love of nature or of our nation's history, consider becoming a National Parks Volunteer.

Being a volunteer has been the most satisfying work I have ever done, and the results have always been in the satisfaction of helping others with the great bonus of making myself happy. And it has been my experience that the greatest joy in volunteer work is to utilize one's best talents.

Thanks to Ken Burns, who has called attention to the treasures of our national parks, we have been made aware of their value. Today they are more than ever vulnerable due to budget cuts and incursions by our current government. Consider the recent destructive actions of this administration against public lands in Utah in order to mine for obsolete coal and unneeded oil. Our parks are well worth our time, our effort, and our devotion.

There are more than 400 official National Park Service (NPS) sites that vary from historical or scientific to the obviously aesthetic, and most of them offer volunteer programs with a range of experiences. For example, there are lots of openings throughout the system for the ordinary visitor services: orientation, gardening, maintenance, archiving, weed war, history, indexing, tour guiding, trail maintenance, birding, and even the more exciting search-and-rescue missions in danger areas.

These are pretty usual. But if you search the internet, you'll see some interesting requests for volunteers in lighthouse duties, oral history transcription, ranger internships, photography, even mule care. In New Orleans and environs, jazz experts are welcomed. At Mount Rainier, you can study amphibians and butterflies. I see a call for a blacksmith and one for a bagpipe player! Some military sites want veterans only.

In our neighborhood, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island National Parks offer this kind of work, as does Grant's Tomb, while nearby Fire Island offers more for nature lovers.

So the range is wide and well-described on the excellent site, [www.volunteers.gov](http://www.volunteers.gov). Just click on the state you want to search and hit the National Park shield logos. When you find a park you like, you can then search its own site to reach the volunteer coordinator.

#### ***Closer to Home***

If the national parks are too far away for you, considering volunteering at our local New York City Parks, not all of which, of course, are verdant; some are historic (in our New York area that's more the rule).

In and around New York there are 33 Park locations, and they are not limited to Central Park and Fort Tryon Park, where, by the way, there are many volunteer opportunities.

However, a word of warning: It is like pulling teeth to try to call them. But there are many volunteer sessions

offered and a complete calendar is available on [www.nycgovparks.org/events/volunteer](http://www.nycgovparks.org/events/volunteer). The range of volunteer job offerings are more the usual maintenance, gardening, and weeding labors listed, but the site is probably worth further exploration.

#### ***Offer Your Gift***

Getting back to National Parks, here is an important further idea. If you have a particular gift(s) or expertise, and have an idea for using it in a park, by all means *make a proposal*. I did, and accomplished the most important thing I have ever done in my life.

At the end of the century and Bill Clinton's presidency he managed to pass an \$8 billion bill to restore water to the Everglades. As a native Floridian who has always loved the Glades, I thought I should try to apply my specialty, which is that of being a professional painter (for more than 50 years at the time), and an advocate for both the arts and the environment.

The Everglades contain the most endangered of all the national parks. I thought that the arts should be part of this restoration. I wrote about 25 letters to various powers that be, suggesting that I start an artists' residency in Everglades National Park. I got a great response from the National Park Service and was told that the Park had wanted to do this but didn't know how to put it together. But I did.

With the help of Alan Scott, Director of Interpretation and Education for Everglades, and of a willing superintendent, we got AIRIE (Artists in Residence in Everglades) started in less than three months. We have brought into the Everglades about 125 high quality professional visual artists, writers, composers, and performers over the past now 17 years, and the benefit to the park has been wonderful – nearly always having an Artist in Residence who interacts with delighted and fascinated Everglades National Park visitors.

The water restoration bill, by the way, never got implemented to any extent; the volunteer project did.

Now I have retired as Founder and Chairman Emeritus of AIRIE, but the people who have taken over the leadership, far more savvy than I, now an old lady, am at social media, are doing a better job than I did. I could not be happier.

And I have now volunteered for a new job as Coordinating Advisor introducing a similar program in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia.

The personal rewards are the friendships that have come to me. Park rangers are simply the finest people I have ever met. They are ethical, dedicated and their love of their land is precious. You can meet them, you can work with them, sharing mutual humanist values, and make a meaningful difference in America as a National Parks Volunteer.

Start here: [www.volunteers.gov](http://www.volunteers.gov)

Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain. ...

In wildness is the preservation of the world.

– Henry David Thoreau

## MY EVERGLADES Donna Marxer

Once  
There were more birds in the sky than anyone could  
count—  
Hérons--tricolors, little blues, great blues, green backs,  
black-crowns  
And aningas, cormorants, bitterns, pelicans. I am out of  
breath

My Everglades is crying.

Then  
There were high-flying bald eagles and wood storks and  
ospreys.  
The sky ran pink from the open wings of roseate  
spoonbills and before them  
Flamingos, now gone forever

My Everglades is bleeding.

Before  
We got our hunger for houses with their very own canals  
and docks and boats  
And developed our enormous sweet tooth  
And choked the Great Slough until the tears and the blood  
ran so thin

My Everglades is dying.

-- August 2007

## SECULAR HUMANISM AS FICTION? Flash Light

George Lucas, who created the Star Wars phenomenon, hired Joseph Campbell to design a religion for his fictional galaxy. Campbell did a remarkably successful job: the fictional Jedi religion became so popular there are real life people who claim to believe in it.

I follow the Star Wars movies because I've had fun doing a parody of them (<http://www.Rabinart.com>), so I went to see the latest episode, "The Last Jedi". I was surprised when the protagonist, Luke Skywalker, the last Jedi Knight, declared several times that the ancient religion had to end.

He even burns the sacred texts he had been guarding, which contains the basis of the ancient religion. While I favor ancient religions ending, I can't condone book burning. I don't want to see the Torah, the New Testament, the Koran, the Vedas, etc., burnt. Rather I would like them understood as collections of ancient myths, which might at one time have served a useful social function, but should only be preserved for the historical record of the mythology, and not interpreted as some kind of revealed truth which must be believed and obeyed.

However, I was intrigued at the idea the ancient religion of the Jedi might end. What then? Dare I hope the galaxy far, far away might turn to secular humanism? OK, not a chance it would be called secular humanism, since many people in that Star Wars audience associate secular humanism with evil atheists, but some term which would come to represent humanist values, and which would cause Star Wars fans to

embrace secular humanist values.

Maybe even that is too much to hope for from Disney. However, it does suggest to me a way for secular humanism to become more popular – namely, using fiction to promote belief in secular humanist values. Okay, the fiction would need super heroes to become popular. Perhaps they could be really intelligent men and women, some gifted writers, or orators, called The Founding Mothers and Fathers? Fighting to free their fictional country from religious oppression.? Too obvious?

Yes, I know there are already history books which seem to serve this purpose, but nevertheless I hear a constant chorus of voices claiming this country was founded as a Christian nation, whereas I've never heard anyone claim Luke Skywalker was a Christian. There are advantages to fiction.

I'm just floating the idea of using fiction as a means to promote secular humanism, in addition to new atheist philosophy books, billboards, letters to the editor, coming out to your friends, etc., all of which have been discussed on these pages. Perhaps some reader knows of such a work of fiction already published, which could be promoted? Perhaps SHSNY could hold an annual competition, asking readers to nominate fiction which best supports the secular humanist cause?

*Comment: Interesting idea, isn't it, readers – an SHSNY award for fiction that promotes secular humanist values? (Philip Pullman's new The Book of Dust trilogy would be an obvious nomination.). Send your nominations to editor@shsnny.org – JR*

## A CORRECTION, WITH APOLOGIES TO CANADA

*To the Editor:* I don't mean to nitpick but I believe there is an error on page 8 of December PIQUE ("Meanwhile, In the Real World of, You Know, Science and, Well, Reality"): namely, Justin Trudeau is not the boss of Julie Payette – if anything it would be the other way around.

Canada is a monarchy and Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state. The Governor General is appointed by the Queen as her viceroy or representative in Canada and the Prime Minister reports to her as the PM of the UK reports to the Queen to get her to sign off on the acts of parliament.

Here is the ranking (from Wikipedia):

*Government:* Federal parliamentary representative democracy under constitutional monarchy

*Monarch:* Elizabeth II

*Governor General:* Julie Payette

*Prime Minister:* Justin Trudeau

*Chief Justice:* Beverley McLachlin.

God Save the Queen!

– Tom Riggins

*Response:* Tom, if only that were the sole error, typo, glitch, blunder, booboo or screwup in the December issue that was rushed to print after the November 28 Board meeting.

Anyway, thanks for the catch – it's good to know there are attentive and careful readers. And I hope you – and Ms. Payette – will forgive me. – JR

## FASCISM IN FOUR EASY STEPS

Joy Reid

On Chris Matthew's "Hardball" show on MSNBC on December 15, commentator Joy Reid took less than a minute-and-a-half to explain the current seemingly senseless clamor by Donald Trump's most ardent supporters for not only a shutdown of the Russia investigations, but a takedown of the FBI and the DOJ. When Matthews asked her what she thinks is going on, she laid out a chilling scenario:

"That *Washington Post* story said that two of Donald Trump's favorite world leaders are Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Vladimir Putin. And it does seem that Donald Trump has their tools of authoritarianism down. He has the dance with authoritarianism down to a science.

"Step one: claim the investigation of you is a fraud being conducted by enemies of the state.

"Step two: get your state-run media, your affinity media, to echo that into your base and whip them up into a frenzy against those investigating you.

"Step three: get the state party—in this case, the Republican party—to echo that from the seat of government and say, 'Wait a minute, the people investigating the president are themselves criminals.' Create this feedback loop that creates a feeding frenzy that has now essentially got Republicans claiming that Bob Mueller, probably one of the most respected members of law enforcement in the last thirty, forty years in the United States, essentially being characterized as a criminal.

"And then of course, you've got to have that last step: call for the prosecution of your political enemies. In this case Hilary Clinton, again calling to "lock her up".

"Donald Trump is an authoritarian of the first order, and he's behaving like one."

*Comment: What a triumvirate: Putin, Erdogan, and Trump, a new fascist Axis for a new century. With Trump, of course, playing Mussolini, the vainglorious idiot who postures and struts while the other two feed him flattery, snigger behind his back, and take him for all America is worth. - JR*

## WHAT IS HE HIDING?

Heather Digby Parton

(Reprinted from [www.salon.com/2017/12/15/trumps-bizarre-love-affair-with-putin-deepens-what-is-he-hiding/](http://www.salon.com/2017/12/15/trumps-bizarre-love-affair-with-putin-deepens-what-is-he-hiding/))

On Thursday, *The Washington Post* published a long article about how Donald Trump is dealing with Russia as president. It wasn't exactly reassuring. The reason is not that he's poised to start a war, as he seems to be with North Korea, but that he's giving away the store to the other side. It's disturbing because Trump doesn't seem to be capable of even thinking about America's relationship with Russia like a president at all. He gets so upset by the investigation into election interference and his subsequent actions that intelligence briefers reportedly don't mention it as a priority, slipping it into the written material -- which he's said in the past he doesn't need to

read -- or sliding it far down the list of items of concern to avoid provoking his ire.

The upshot is that the president isn't able to focus on relations with Russia at a time when it couldn't be more important to do so. Trump's insistence that there was no election interference has taken on the character of a bizarre fixation that is inhibiting the rest of the government from doing its job. And it seems nobody has a clue what to do about it.

The article is full of interesting details about the inner workings of Trump's national security team and how they deal with this mercurial boss. For instance, he once assumed his highly qualified Russia expert Fiona Hill (the co-author of a major biography of Vladimir Putin) was a clerical worker. Trump asked her to retype a memo, became angry when she seemed confused by the order and demanded that national security adviser H.R. McMaster reprimand her -- which, astonishingly, he did.

But then, none of that should be too surprising. Trump is no more respectful of world leaders with whom he doesn't feel that personal kinship. He reportedly got bored in the middle of a briefing about Angela Merkel and went into the bathroom, leaving the door open and telling his aides to speak up while he primped in front of the mirror. We all saw his refusal to shake Merkel's hand in front of the press and this derisive tweet from a couple of years ago:

*I told you @TIME Magazine would never pick me as person of the year despite being the big favorite They picked person who is ruining Germany  
8:53 AM - Dec 9, 2015*

He apparently doesn't consider her an equal on par with strongmen like Putin or China's Xi Jinping, both of whom he shows a deference that verges on obsequiousness.

The article is a portrait of a man-child, so deeply over his head that you wonder if he isn't literally going to hold his breath until he turns blue before it's all over. In that sense, it tracks with the recent *New York Times* article that depicted Trump tweeting from his pillow in the morning, wandering around in his bathrobe, drinking two six packs of Diet Coke and watching up to eight hours of cable news a day.

After reading both of these articles, you get the sense that somebody in the White House has decided that the best defense against charges that Trump colluded with Russia is for people to believe that he behaves as he does because he's a narcissistic simpleton who can't deal with the fact that he didn't win the popular vote. While that description may be accurate, it doesn't let him off the hook.

*The Post's* reporters vaguely examine the possibility that there could be some blackmail material or *kompromat* hanging out there, or that Trump has some serious financial exposure somewhere in his past. But the article primarily relies on his aides' portrayal of him as someone who believes in the power of his personality to bond with Vladimir Putin, and believes that together they will solve the world's problems.

Furthermore, the authors seem to take at face value the

assertion that Trump's insistence that the Russians played no part in the election is because "the idea that he's been put into office by Vladimir Putin is pretty insulting." Trump is essentially depicted as a juvenile egomaniac who lacks the capacity or imagination to have done anything as sophisticated as collude with a foreign country.

This is spin that I often see reporters and pundits regurgitate on TV, as if this can all be explained away by the proposition that Trump is a buffoon who is constantly frustrated by people saying he didn't really win. But this fails to account for all the sucking up he did toward Putin during in the campaign and his continued inability to say a bad word about him ever since. It's not as if Trump is usually at a loss for a well-timed insult.

It also fails to account for the fact that Trump has shown not even minimal interest in doing a "deal" with Russia that would benefit the United States. While he repeatedly insults our allies and crudely demands that they pay protection in return for the U.S. living up to its treaties and commitments, he asked for nothing from Putin in return for lifting sanctions and putting up barriers to NATO expansion, other than a vague promise that everyone "gets along".

The idea that Putin is the only man on earth Trump sees as a partner in bringing peace on earth just doesn't pass the smell test. That the self-anointed master negotiator has not seized the opportunity to use the knowledge we have about election interference as a bargaining chip, and instead seems inclined to grant Putin his wish list for nothing in return, does not give one much confidence.

Trump lies about everything, so there is no reason to take him at his word on any of this. Of course he is upset about the Russia investigation, and of course it bothers him that people might think he didn't legitimately win the election. But it's hardly likely that he behaves this way because he's an innocent man. In fact, it's ludicrous. Everything we know about him suggests the opposite.

Whether it's about Trump's past financial exposure or the rumored salacious *kompromat* or some agreement over dirt on Hillary Clinton or a big hotel deal, there is definitely more to this. He doesn't act like a man who has been unjustly accused. He acts like a man who's hiding something and thinks if he blusters and blames he can hide his guilt from his staff and even from himself. He can't.

## THE REAL RUSSIA SCANDAL

**Bret Stephens**

*(Excerpted from The New York Times OpEd, 12/15/2017)*

**W**hat about Trump's motives? In The Washington Post on Thursday, reporters Greg Miller, Greg Jaffe and Philip Rucker offer a stunning description of the president's curious incuriousness when it comes to the question of Russian interference in our elections. That's followed by a catalog of all the many ways in which the American president sought to appease the Russian dictator.

Cases in point: The president still does not fully accept

the verdict of his intelligence agencies that Russia interfered in the election. He told Bill O'Reilly that America's behavior was no better than Putin's. His attorney general admitted to Congress that the administration had "probably not" taken sufficient measures to prevent future Russian meddling in elections. He explored ways to return two Russian diplomatic compounds in the United States long used for spying until they were seized by the Obama administration.

It continues: He spent the first five months in office resisting efforts to get him to publicly avow NATO's mutual-defense commitments. He sought an "impenetrable cybersecurity unit" with Moscow until Lindsey Graham dismissed it as "pretty close" to "the dumbest idea I've ever heard." He fiercely resisted congressional efforts to impose additional sanctions on Russia; was "apoplectic" when they passed; and would have vetoed the legislation if it weren't certain he'd be overridden. He ended American support for anti-regime moderates in Syria, paving the way for the Assad regime — and thus its Russian helpers — to consolidate their grip.

Presented with this list, the president's craven apologists insist he's right to try to find common ground with Russia. These are the same people who until recently were in full throat against Barack Obama for his overtures to Putin. More measured apologists say he's merely naïve, just as Obama and Bush were at the beginning of their terms. Yet the alleged naïveté never quits: Just this week, he asked for Putin's help on North Korea.

The better explanations are: (a) the president is infatuated with authoritarians, at least those who flatter him; (b) he's neurotically neuralgic when it comes to the subject of his election; (c) he's ideologically sympathetic to Putinism, with its combination of economic corporatism, foreign-policy cynicism, and violent hostility to critics; (d) he's stupid; or (e) he's vulnerable to Russian blackmail.

Each explanation is compatible with all the others. For my part, I choose all of the above — the first four points being demonstrable while the last is logical. But let's have that conversation at another time. There's no need to obsess about electoral collusion when the real issue is moral capitulation.

## READERS RESPOND

*To the Editor:* Thank you so much for a very interesting —and useful—exposé of the Second Amendment ("The Greatest Fraud", *et seq*, November).

I obviously think Trump is a huge danger for our democratic values. But even worse is the NRA. Who are those people? (I know the NRA is an association but it is made of people.) Aren't these people citizens, schooled to revere and protect the country they live in?

Anyway, good job.

— Martine Reed

*Response:* Yes, the NRA is an association of citizen-members going back to 1871, but the facts are that a right-wing-financed coup in the 1970s turned it into a gun industry lobby with one agenda: more guns for more people, at whatever cost, period. — JR

## SECULAR COMFORTS

Alex Kasman

*(Excerpted from The Separationist, newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SC), December, 2017)*

Twice a year, I make a presentation to a religious studies class at the College of Charleston. The best part of my “Meet an Atheist” talk is at the end when the students can ask me questions. One of the questions I was asked recently was “Where do you find comfort?” That question caught me off guard. I don’t remember exactly what I said, but I suspect my answer was unsatisfactory. Now that I have had time to think, I would like to try to formulate a better answer and test it out on you.

Just like anyone, regardless of religion, I find comfort in the people that I love and in the beauty found in both art or nature. But, the question itself implies that it I am missing some source of comfort that is available only to “believers”.

When I call myself a humanist, it is because I identify with all of humanity. I am proud to be part of this team working together to do more than just survive. I’d like to think that I’m making my own little contributions to our efforts to understand how the universe works, to invent new things and create artwork.

Life really looks quite unfair. A religious person may find comfort in thinking that these apparent injustices are made right by an all-powerful being in the eternal afterlife.

But, I think life is actually exactly as unfair as it seems. Still, I find comfort in my ability to do something, even if it is only a little something, to make it more fair. Through my charitable donations and volunteering, by how I treat the people around me, and by how I *vote*, I like to believe that I am going to leave the world a little more like that ideal we all wish it was,

Religious people will tell me that the *purpose* in their life comes from their faith, and that my secular life must therefore be (or seem) purposeless. But, it certainly does not feel that way. There is enough joy and love in life to make it worth living. I do not believe there is any actual *magic* in the universe, but there is enough mystery and grandeur in the natural world to inspire awe. And, I do not believe that our souls “live” forever, but that makes the short lifetimes that we are lucky enough to have even more precious.

And finally, although I’m sure it *would* be pleasant to believe that I am personally loved by the creator of the universe, pleasure is not actually a criterion that determines what I believe. In fact, I would rather know the truth than believe a pleasing falsehood. So, ironically, my confidence that I am following the evidence and logic rather than pursuing “comfort” is itself a source of comfort.

*Comment: Well? Where do we find “comfort”? I admit the question caught me a little wrong-footed, too, and I’m thinking about my own answer. Meanwhile, what’s yours? – JR*

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