

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2019

Summer's over, and in a back-to-school mood we examine our cultural and familial roots, wonder if we're too dumb for democracy, let alone the internet, and consign ourselves to the sh*thole of geography. We get a good-news report from our Brit cousins, check out New York State's good eco-news, offer James Haught on religion's decline, Stephen Hawking on A.I., and Harry Truman on decency in the Oval Office (remember that?). And speaking of decency, we ask for *your* opinions on everyday morality (*page 3*) and, in the spirit of the season, wish you all *A gut gebentsht yar.* —JR

A WISH FOR THE JEWISH NEW YEAR, AND FOR THE AMERICA THAT LIES AHEAD

David Brooks

(Reprinted from "Your Daily Dose of Optimism! The America that lies beyond our current despair", in *The New York Times*, 7/20/2019)

Someone recently gave me a book of photos taken on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1890s. The conditions were horrible: homeless, malnourished children sleeping in a clump, barefoot in a doorway. There was a block, on Bayard Street, with 39 tenement houses, and 2,781 people squeezed into them. There were only 264 toilets on that entire block and no showers or baths. There were 441 rooms on that block with no ventilation, where people lived in the shadows, catching tuberculosis and diphtheria.

My grandfather, Bernard Levy, grew up there, off Bayard Street, a few years later. He went to a public high school and a public college and rose to become a lawyer. He spent his evenings writing letters to the editor that he hoped would be printed in *The New York Times*. He didn't live to see me get a job here, but I am living out his dream. Our family life, from the Lower East Side upward, is a social mobility miracle.

When you grow up with this background, you have a deep sense of the goodness and purpose of America. America is the land of milk and honey. Lincoln could go from a log cabin to the White House. A Jewish boy from the Bronx named Ralph Lifshitz could grow up to become Ralph Lauren and redefine American preppy. You could be born on the fringes and assimilate into this new thing called an American.

I used to think we could revive that story for the 21st century, but we probably can't. Too many people feel left

out of it. Plus, there is no longer a single American mainstream to serve as the structural spine of the nation. Mainline Protestantism is no longer the dominant religion and cultural force. The WASP establishment no longer rules the roost. There is no white majority in our kindergartens, and soon there will be no white majority in our society.

The big three TV networks no longer dominate the culture the way they did. There is no one dominant musical genre. The national ruling class has lost legitimacy. Social trust is strongest at the local levels, which grow more polarized from one another. Politically, we're in an age of extremes.

The reality and challenge is that America has become radically pluralistic. We used to be unipolar — one dominant majority culture and a lot of minority groups that defined themselves against it. Now we're multipolar. We're all minorities now.

That could blow us to smithereens. But who knows? We could learn to be minorities together, to be what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls creative minorities. In a brilliant 2013 lecture, Sacks noted that when Solomon's temple was destroyed and the Jews were cast into exile, the prophet Jeremiah had a surprising message: Go to new lands. Build houses. Plant gardens. Seek the peace and prosperity of the cities in which you settle.

Jeremiah was saying you don't need to assimilate into the new place. Nor do you need to withdraw into a culturally pure enclave. Instead, don't be afraid to be a distinct, orthodox version of yourself within a larger society. Build a rich moral community. Just don't try to universalize your faith or even become a dominant minority. Interact with the world around you, confident in your own particularity, but realize that every time you seek to dominate others, you will wind up dominated.

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This stance – aggressive interaction without an attempt to be hegemonic – made the Jews creative in three ways, Sacks argues.

First, the encounter with other cultures led to great flowerings of Jewish thought. Jews wrestled with the best ideas they encountered from outside. Second, Jews were often bridges between different civilizations. Through trade, they linked China and the West during the Middle Ages. Third, Jews emerged from their secure base and made great contributions to the wider world: Spinoza, Freud, Einstein.

In a world of radical pluralism, we are all Jews. We have no choice but to build a mass multicultural democracy, a society that has no dominant center but is a collection of creative minorities.

Nearly 200 years ago, Tocqueville wrote that democracy was creating a new sort of man. Pluralism today is creating a new sort of person, especially among the young. They don't just relish diversity; they embody it. Many have mixed roots – say, half-French/half-Dominican. Many are border stalkers; they live between cultures, switch back and forth, and work hard to build a multiplicity of influences into a single coherent life. They're Whitmanesque, containing multitudes, holding opposite ideas in their minds at the same time.

Radical pluralism also necessitates retelling the nation's history. We've always been a universal nation, a crossroads nation, a nation whose very identity is defined by the fact that it is a hub for a dense network of minorities and subgroups, and the distinct way of life they fashion to interact and flourish together.

I used to think that America had to find a new unifying national narrative. Now I wonder if not having a single national narrative will become our national narrative.

MY FATHER WAS AN IMMIGRANT

Jonathan Engel

You might not know it to look at me or talk to me, but my father was an immigrant to the United States. I look like your basic white guy. Like most Americans, English is unfortunately the only language I speak, albeit with a fairly heavy New York City accent. I love hamburgers, apple pie and the New York Yankees. But yes, my late father was an immigrant to the United States.

Steven Engel was born in the Jewish section of Montreal, Canada. His parents had trekked from Belarus to Denmark, to the U.K., to Canada and then, after my father was born, to the United States. They were looking for a place they could belong. Denmark, the U.K. and Canada are all fine countries, but the U.S. is different. We are a country of immigrants, and so my grandparents came here, with my father in tow.

My father volunteered for service in the Air Force during World War II. He was a founding member of the Nassau County chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, because he believed in equal rights for all. And in 1958 he joined with four of his neighbors to sue the local public school district for violating the Constitution by

sponsoring organized prayers in our schools, a case the plaintiffs won at the Supreme Court (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962).

Some in our community who favored public school prayer sent hate mail to our house that contained threats, anti-Semitic slurs, and strong suggestions that my father and his entire family (including me; I was four at the time) should leave the country. They thought my father, a war veteran and dedicated family man, should leave, while violent, racist, anti-Semitic knuckle draggers such as themselves were the only "real" Americans.

At the time my father's response was essentially "Screw that and screw them." As a naturalized citizen, he had the same rights as any other American, born here or not. And he would not apologize to anyone for fighting to improve the country he loved and to encourage it to live up to its founding ideals.

"Screw that and screw them."

That's what my father said then and that's what I say now to anyone, including Donald Trump, who suggests that immigrants should keep their mouths shut, their heads down, and just leave if they don't like injustice, instead of fighting that injustice. But fighting injustice is what real Americans do, whether native born or naturalized.

To quote Lin Miranda, the creator of the musical "Hamilton": "Immigrants; we get the job done."

A FEEL-GOOD STORY FROM OUR COUSINS IN THE UK

Hello John, I trust you are well. I thought you might be interested in this which is (for once) a good news story.

Hamza bin Walayat was born in Pakistan but in his teen age years began to have doubts and then reject Islam. He came under increasing pressure to attend the mosque as did his family to force him to do so.

The pressure turned into death threats and, convinced that he would be killed if he stayed, he fled to the UK and claimed asylum as a Humanist. He lived rough in London, sleeping on park benches, while his claim was being considered by the Home Office. He was refused asylum on the grounds that his knowledge of Humanism was "rudimentary" and he could not name any ancient Greek philosophers who were Humanists. He was shown pictures of Aristotle and Plato and failed to identify either. Indeed, having been brought up in rural Pakistan, he had never heard of either.

HUK [Humanists United Kingdom] took up his case and we helped organise a petition to the Home Office signed by 120 leading contemporary philosophers arguing the case that the test was not a fair one, not least because neither Aristotle nor Plato were Humanists.

HUK's campaign to prevent Hamza being deported attracted thousands of signatures and questions in Parliament. The result was that the asylum claim was permitted and he was allowed to stay. Moreover the Home Office admitted its mistake, recognised that their staff needed training in the nature and content of Humanism, asked us for training materials and, eventually, delivered

the training to all its interviewing officers.

Meanwhile Hamza has settled into his new life, is a volunteer in our pastoral support network, is secretary of the Greater Manchester Humanists and, at our Annual General Meeting last month was elected to the HUK Board.

Now that, I think, constitutes a good news story! I hope you have some as well.

Otherwise, the news from the UK is Boris, bombast and Brexit (some of which might ring a bell).

Regards, Professor John C Adams,

THE BIGGEST NEWS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

James A. Haught

(Reprinted from Patheos/Daylight Atheism, 8/5/2019)

What is the most significant occurrence so far in the 21st century? Worsening weather calamities caused by global warming? Endless suicide bombings and massacres by religious fanatics in the Islamic “cult of death”? Snowballing acceptance of gays as equal humans? Kakistocracy (government by the worst) under a ludicrous president who has told 10,000 countable lies? Recurring U.S. gun massacres? All of those are important, but I nominate another:

The remarkably rapid collapse of religion in advanced democracies.

It’s major news with far-reaching impact. Sociologists are stunned by the abrupt downfall of supernatural faith in Western civilization. The swift cultural transformation gained recognition in the 1990s and then accelerated.

For example, more than half of United Kingdom adults now have no church identity, according to the latest British Social Attitudes survey. *The Guardian* of London reported:

“Fifty-two percent of the public say they do not belong to any religion, compared to 31 percent in 1983 when the BSA began tracking religious belief.” One in four members of the public stated, “I do not believe in God,” compared with one in ten in 1998.

The London *Telegraph* added that 26 percent of Britons labeled themselves “confident atheists”, up from 10 percent in 1998. It quoted researcher Nancy Kelley as saying the surprising retreat of religion is “one of the most important trends in postwar history”.

Similar findings are reported across western Europe, Scandinavia, Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the like. Secularism has soared since the 1990s. Europeans spent centuries killing each other over religion, but now it elicits a mere shrug.

America traditionally was an exception, a faith stronghold, but the United States is joining the secular tsunami. A recent Gallup poll found that church membership fell twenty percent in the past two decades. One-fourth of American adults now say their faith is “none”, and the ratio is one-third among those under thirty.

In fact, this country has more nonreligious adults than any other nation except China, according to a 2015 book, *American Secularism*.

However, like many profound culture shifts, the

change is barely noticed in daily life. Television still teems with big-money evangelists who buy air time to beg for cash to buy more air time. Politicians (especially Republicans) still invoke the holies daily and demand public displays of the motto “In God We Trust”.

Speaking of Republicans, the GOP relies heavily upon white evangelicals as its political base. As religion shrinks, the future power of the conservative party is thrown into doubt. Polls show that born-again whites were 27 percent of America’s population in the 1990s, but now they’ve slipped as low as 13 percent. Southern Baptists have lost 1.5 million members since 2006. But those who remain are intensely active in politics. They gave 81 percent of their votes to Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

Why do fundamentalists embrace a vulgar, shallow, obnoxious, juvenile, self-worshipping racist who abuses women and boasted that he can “grab ‘em by the pussy”? Why do they want the extreme opposite of Jesus? Wake Forest University church historian Bill Leonard says white evangelicals flock to Trump because they’re in “panic at the precipitous decline of Christianity”.

In other words, conservative Christians feel their dominance of America’s culture evaporating, and they’re desperate. For example, they spent centuries demonizing “evil” gays, yet most Americans now accept homosexuals cordially, and the Supreme Court allowed same-sex marriage. It was a crushing blow to the “religious right”.

In fact, repulsive political activity by white evangelicals is a strong reason why many tolerant young Americans renounce religion.

Of course, faith remains strong in Muslim lands (where several nations decree death for “blasphemy”) and in the tropics (where millions of Africans and Latin Americans are Pentecostals who “speak in tongues”). But in Western civilization, profound demographic change is happening in this 21st century. White Christian America is fizzling away, month after month, year after year. Old Puritanical taboos are disappearing. The alliance of Bible-thumping evangelicals and the Republican Party has a diminishing future, doomed to minority status. Churches are shrinking. Secularism is soaring. Humanist values wield ever-greater strength in public life.

All I can say is: Hallelujah!

WHAT MORAL CHOICES DO YOU MAKE?

Garrison Keillor via John Rafferty

(Editor: I know, I know, I’m not supposed to even “like” Garrison Keillor anymore, let alone feature him in a freethought publication like this one. But I still get the Garrison Keillor Newsletter every morning (and discover a poem or two every week that I would never have come across on my own) and the August 14 excerpt below, from “Ignore the noise, sing for the ones in back,” caused me to wonder: What everyday moral choices do we humanists, who have a thing about morality, make? – JR)

Moral choices face us every day. Standing in Whole Foods at the array of olive oils, I pass over the French and Italian for political reasons and choose

the Portuguese because I met olive growers in Portugal last summer, village people, and liked them, and I assume California olives come from groves owned by Silicon Valley tycoons as a tax write-off and may contain silicon and the Spanish may come from old Franco sympathizers, and then I choose a raw, unfiltered, organic kosher vinegar – how can you argue with organic kosher? – and then on to the butter. I buy the local small-town creamery butter over the major corporate: I seem to recall a hefty political donation by Big Butter in exchange for relaxed regulation. And this is why shopping takes me longer than it otherwise might.

Righteousness.

Comment & Question: SO ... What about you, me, us, secular humanists? How do we practice what we don't preach? What choices do you make at the supermarket and the drugstore, when you download music, choose a movie, change the TV channel, buy a book? How do you – humanistically – deal with the humans who share your urban space? Share your personal moral ideas and standards with us – email them to editor@shsny.org, please.

GETTING YOUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT

John Rafferty

Reports on both Politico.com and Insider.com indicate that white evangelicals are becoming increasingly upset with Donald Trump, some even contemplating “staying home” instead of voting next year.

One of several cases in point: Trump’s speech in Greenville, North Carolina, which included the crowd chanting “Send her back!” in reference to Dem. Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota. But, unlike the majority of the country, it wasn’t Trump’s racism that provoked the evangelicals. Rather, they were upset that Trump was “using the Lord’s name in vain”.

Say what? “Goddamn”, that’s what.

Not racism, not misogyny, not fraud, not climate-change denial, not twelve thousand lies, not possible conspiracy to commit treason ... saying “Goddamn”.

Nothing like having your priorities straight.

WHEN CONSERVATIVES WERE ACTUALLY, YOU KNOW, CONSERVATIVE

Barry Goldwater

There is no position on which people are so immovable as their religious beliefs. There is no more powerful ally one can claim in a debate than Jesus Christ, or God, or Allah, or whatever one calls this supreme being. The religious factions that are growing throughout our land are not using their religious clout with wisdom. They are trying to force government leaders into following their position 100 percent. If you disagree with these religious groups on a particular moral issue, they complain, they threaten you with a loss of money or votes or both. I’m frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me ... that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in A, B, C, and D. Just who do they think they are? – *Senator Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., from the Congressional Record, 9/16/1981.*

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT vs. DEMOCRACY

(This summary of different posts is from “The Religious Right: Reconsidering Democracy?” reprinted from The Week, June 28, 2019, in The Secular Circular, Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara, July, 2019.)

Anguished by their defeats in the culture wars, some religious conservatives are beginning to wonder “whether liberal democracy’s time has passed”, said Adam Serwer in TheAtlantic.com. In a recent article in the religious journal, *First Things*, Catholic writer Sohrab Ahmari bluntly accuses libertarian-leaning conservatives of enabling liberals’ degradation of American society. Too many conservative intellectuals, Ahmari argues, have passively accepted the Left’s victories on issues such as same-sex marriage and transgender rights out of a misguided concern over “civility” and individual liberty – leaving the Christian-based moral order teetering on the edge of total destruction. Conservatives must “fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy”, he writes, by any means necessary, so as to serve “the Highest Good”.

Ahmari has a point, said Ben Domenech in TheFederalist.com. Progressives are “bent on utter and total destruction of everything American Christians hold dear”, including even their right to express their “offensive views” in public. It’s time for social conservatives to accept that “We have reached a point in America where politeness and decency is no longer the best approach to politics.” That’s why so many Christians have embraced Trump’s “more brutal approach” to politics.

Sorry, but if conservatives go down this path, they’re just as bad “as the leftists they disdain”, said Steven Greenhut in Reason.com. Ahmari doesn’t say exactly how he would impose his vision of morality on the country. But “One needn’t take too many leaps to see where this populist-religious conservatism is headed.”

“I’m flummoxed by this debate,” said Michelle Goldberg in *The New York Times*. “Conservatives control the presidency, the Senate, and the Supreme Court, and Trump is installing dozens of far-right Christian judges in federal courts. Nevertheless, social conservatives feel apocalyptically embattled.”

It’s worth noting that Ahmari started this debate after being triggered by an advertisement for a Drag Queen Story Hour for children at a public library – an event he called “demonic”. Do Christians really face an existential threat because drag queens are no longer universally reviled?

What really infuriates Ahmari and people like him is that he now has to live in a society where his views no longer dictate how other people live. “When one is accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.”

HOW RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REALLY WORKS

(From a Facebook post shared by Gretchen Robinson)

Them: My religion says I can’t do that.

Us: Okay.

Them: My religion says you can’t do that.

Us: Fuck off.

A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN RIGHT IN 29 "OH MY GODS!"

John Rafferty

OMG Indians!
OMG Witches!
OMG Revolutionaries!
OMG The French!
OMG Abolitionists!
OMG Vengeful Slaves!
OMG Catholics!
OMG Irish!
OMG Jews!
OMG Italians!
OMG Anarchists!
OMG Unions!
OMG Okies!
OMG Japanese!
OMG Commies!
OMG Spies!
OMG Uppity Negroes!
OMG Women's Libbers!
OMG Lesbians!
OMG AIDS!
OMG Welfare Queens!
OMG WMDs!
OMG Black President!
OMG Caitlin Jenner!
OMG Gay Marriage!
OMG Ebola!
OMG Hilary!
OMG Mexicans!
OMG Refugee Children!

JUST IN CASE YOU THINK DEFEATING TRUMP NEXT YEAR WILL BE A WALK IN THE PARK ...

Jonathan Easley

*(Excerpted from "Evangelicals go all in for Trump reelection",
on Thehill.com, 6/21/2019)*

Faith leaders and anti-abortion groups are ramping up their efforts to reelect President Trump, rewarding a president who has become an unlikely hero of the Christian right because of his commitment to socially conservative causes.

The Faith and Freedom Coalition will spend tens of millions of dollars on a voter mobilization effort that aims to register 1 million Christians in key battleground states and reach 30 million people nationwide.

The group, which is led by conservative activist Ralph Reed, will pump literature into more than 100,000 churches across 18 states, primarily focusing on the presidential battlegrounds but also with an eye on contested House and Senate races. The Susan B. Anthony (SBA) List, an anti-abortion rights group, has a budget of \$41 million this campaign cycle to "expose the extremism of Trump's opponents", among other initiatives.

SBA List will pay more than 1,000 canvassers in eight

battleground states with the aim of knocking on 4 million doors. The group will partner with local churches and anti-abortion groups in states such as North Carolina, Florida, Iowa, Michigan and Arizona to turn out conservative voters for Trump's reelection.

And the Family Research Council's political action arm is activating its network of churches and community impact teams in North Carolina, Michigan, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas to turn out the vote.

"Trump's support among Christian voters is at an absolute fever pitch right now," said Lance Lemmonds, the communications director for the Faith and Freedom Coalition. ...

Exit polls from 2016 found Trump received more than 80 percent support from evangelicals, a religious group that accounts for about one-quarter of the nation's voting population. A recent Pew survey found Trump's approval rating is sky high among evangelicals, at about 70 percent.

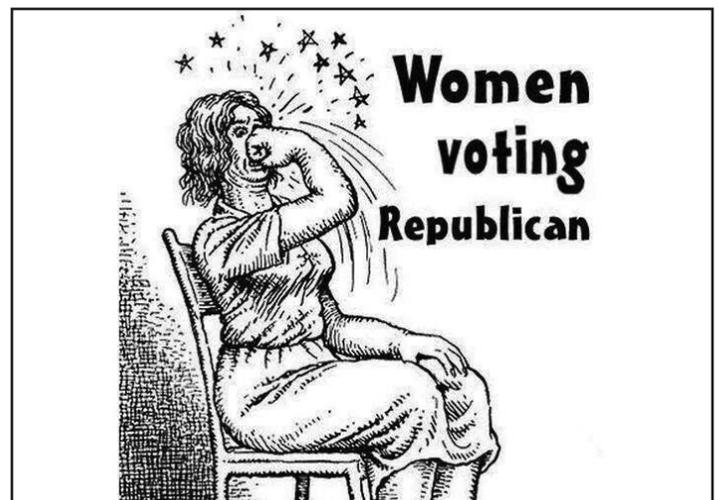
But faith leaders interviewed by *The Hill* say that approval rating underestimates the amount of enthusiasm that exists for the president among religious conservatives, many of whom were skeptical that he would deliver on his promises when they voted for him the first time in 2016.

Now, they describe Trump as "the most pro-life president in history" and view him as a warrior for conservative cultural values on everything from protecting religious liberty to nominating conservative judges, including two Supreme Court justices.

They say the Christian right will turn out once again for Trump in 2020 and could tip the balance of the election in his favor. "It's a huge political force, especially now that the uncertainty is gone about how Trump would govern," said Frank Cannon, the president of the American Principles Project, a conservative think tank.

Trump's supporters in the religious community have drawn accusations of hypocrisy from some, who view the president as immoral and say his rhetoric toward women and immigrants should be anathema to people of faith.

They point to Trump's past as a thrice-married Manhattan real estate tycoon who does not regularly attend church or speak about his spiritual life.



SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2019

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

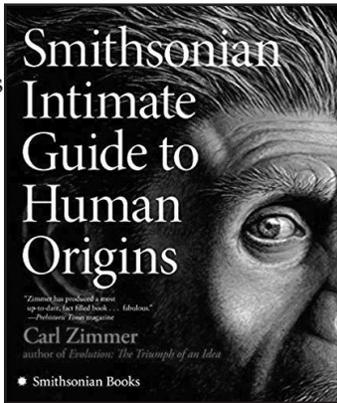
THURS, SEP 5, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
We'll discuss

**SMITHSONIAN INTIMATE
GUIDE TO HUMAN ORIGINS**

Carl Zimmer

From the savannas of Africa to modern-day labs for biomechanical analysis and molecu-



lar genetics, *Smithsonian Intimate Guide to Human Origins* reveals how anthropologists are furiously redrawing the human family tree. Their discoveries have spawned a host of new questions ...

Should chimpanzees be included as a human species? Was it the physical difficulty of human childbirth that encouraged the development of social groups in early human species? Did humans and Neanderthals interbreed?

And, of course, Why and how did humans supplant Neanderthals in the end?

In answering such questions, this important book sheds new light on one of the most important questions of all: What makes us human?

– Earle Bowers will lead.

– *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, OCT 3, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

MISTAKES WERE MADE

(BUT NOT BY ME)

Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts

Tavris & Aronson

Why do people dodge responsibility when things fall apart? Why the parade of public figures unable to own up when they screw up? Why the endless marital quarrels over who is right? Why can we see hypocrisy in others but not in ourselves? Are we all liars? Or do we really believe the stories we tell?

Renowned social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson take a look into how the brain is wired for self-justification.

– Richard Heller will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

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

THE WHISPERERS

Private Life in Stalin's Russia

Orlando Figes

Drawing on a huge range of sources, Orlando Figes tells the story of how Russians tried to endure life under Stalin. Those who shaped the political system became, very frequently, its victims. Those who were its victims were frequently quite blameless.

The Whisperers re-creates the sort of maze in which Russians found themselves, a society in which everyone spoke in whispers – whether to protect themselves, their families, neighbors or friends – or to inform on them.

– *Paperback available.*

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, SEP 15, 11:30 am

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

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$16 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.



Come join fellow freethinkers for food, fun and conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

Is liberal democracy a good thing?

SHSNY Members are also ...

Artist

HARVEY OFFENHARTZ
is showing his new paintings in a 2-person show

Chelminski and Offenhartz

August 31 to October 12

Washington Art Association
and Gallery

4 Bryan Plaza,

Washington Depot, CT

Opening Reception: Aug 31, 4-6pm

Hours: Tues-Sat: 10am - 5pm

SHSNY Members Only ...

**PROMOTE YOUR EVENT
IN PIQUE**

Are you showing your art (*see above*) or photography ... singing in a chorus, acting, dancing or otherwise performing ... giving a lecture or a reading, or participating on a panel? If so, we want to tell all of PIQUE's readers about it.

Send your info to editor@shsny.org no later than the 20th of the month for the next month's edition of this newsletter. *And break a leg!*

SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2019

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB
TUES, SEPT 10, 7:00 pm
Nancy Adelman's apartment
205 Third Ave. (6H)

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

THE OVERSTORY

Richard Powers

Winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, this is a sweeping, impassioned work of activism and resistance that is also a stunning evocation of – and paean to – the natural world, from the roots to the crown and back to the seeds, unfolding in concentric rings of interlocking fables that range from antebellum New York to the late twentieth-century Timber Wars of the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

“The best novel ever written about trees, and really just one of the best novels, period.”

– Ann Patchett

To reserve your seat on the sofa, and/or to nominate the next book for us to read, contact:
editor@shsny.org

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB
TUES, OCT 8, 7:00 pm
Nancy Adelman's apartment
DEATH IN VENICE

Thomas Mann

A classic depiction of emotional suffering, *Death in Venice* brilliantly depicts the tragic intensity of inner psychological torment. Published on the eve of World War I, it tells the story of Gustav von Aschenbach, a successful but aging writer who follows his wanderlust to Venice in search of spiritual fulfillment that instead leads to sexually-fueled obsession and eventually his erotic doom.

Advance-Reading Notice: Nov. 12: Beloved, by Toni Morrison

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
SUNDAY, SEP 29, 11:30 am
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

THE RATIONAL OPTIMIST

How Prosperity Evolves

Dr. Matt Ridley

Matt Ridley demonstrates that life is getting better – and at an accelerating rate. Food availability, income, and life span are up, disease, child mortality, and violence are down – all across the globe. Though the world is far from perfect, necessities and luxuries alike are getting cheaper, population growth is slowing, and Africa is following Asia out of poverty; the Internet, the mobile phone, and container shipping are enriching people's lives as never before.

Dr. Ridley does more than describe how things are getting better: he explains why.

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule (barring blizzards, holidays and schedule conflicts/screwups) is ...

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Community Church of NY
Fiction Book Club: 2nd Tuesday
at Nancy Adelman's apartment

Brunch: Third Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge

Great Lectures on DVD

Last Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

For more info and/or updates,

editor@shsny.org,

or call 646-922-7389,

and leave a call-back number.

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Jennifer Sears & Massimo Pigliucci

June 22, 2019

ARE WE TOO DUMB FOR DEMOCRACY?

David Masciotra

(Excerpted from "Are we just too dumb for democracy?", at Salon.com 7/4 /2019)

The provincialism of American culture renders its politics both farcical and dangerous. ... Most Americans know and care little about the world beyond its borders. In 2003, when Americans still had the minimal interest in international affairs necessary to understand who we were bombing, a U.S. strategic task force concluded that ... our ignorance of the outside world was so great as to constitute a threat to national security.

A *National Geographic* survey indicates that merely 37 percent of recent college graduates can identify Iraq on a map, most failed to identify North Korea, only one in four could identify Iran or Israel, and among Americans ages 18 to 24, 6 percent could not even point to the United States. ...

The American perspective on history is as sophisticated as one would expect in a country where Donald Trump can even run for president without eliciting universal laughter and disgust. Three-fourths of the public is unaware why the U.S. fought a cold war with the Soviet Union, and 41 percent are unfamiliar with the term "Auschwitz". ...

Decades of of compounding fatuity have created a culture where leisure reading, according to several reports, is at an all time low. It seems unlikely that those Americans who do crack open a book are studying comparative politics or international relations. Consider that in recent years the bestselling "historian" in the country was Bill O'Reilly.

To bemoan the spectacular incuriosity of Americans is not an exercise in snobbery, but a red alarm warning of an impending crisis. The consequences of American ignorance are not academic. A *Washington Post* survey, two years after American forces invaded Iraq, revealed that 70 percent of respondents believed that Saddam Hussein was personally responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

American provincialism also functions as insulation of the brain, preventing the average citizen from seeing and hearing the warning signs that history offers into the transformation of democracy into despotic rule. Fascism is not an overnight development, and when your country is debating whether its treatment of immigrant and refugee children qualifies for the term "concentration camp", you have already taken a few large steps down that deadly road.

JESUS, MO, AND DUNNING-KRUGER

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/comic/hold2/)

Jesus: The Dunning-Kruger effect means that incompetent people often lack the ability to recognize their own incompetence. They suffer from illusory superiority, which means that not only do they reach erroneous conclusions, but they hold fast to them with great self-confidence.

Mohammed: That would explain why 99 percent of scientists believe in evolution.

Jesus: Yep - condemned to Hell by their incompetence and lack of self-awareness.

Mo: Thank God we're experts.

HUMAN BEINGS WEREN'T READY FOR THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Jonathan Engel

Sometimes advances in technology outpace human beings' ability to handle the technology safely and responsibly. This was arguably true about the atomic bomb, which was developed and used before people came to the realization that use of such weapons would likely put us all on the road to annihilation. By the way, this has been a basic plot thread of many science fiction novels through the years, from "Frankenstein" to "Jurassic Park". I believe that this is also proving true about the internet and social media.

Sad to say, but homo sapiens have proven to be too gullible, too ignorant, and too malevolent to be trusted with the power of the internet and social media. Examples of this abound. Russian trolls and their American allies spread reams of misinformation during the 2016 election, and now we have President Donald J. Trump, at least in part because so many people lacked the intelligence, depth of knowledge, and yes, decency, to resist the propaganda.

Recently two police officers in Louisiana were fired from their jobs for suggesting on social media that Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez should be shot (!) for having said something on Facebook that, in fact, she never actually said. But these two cops lacked the discernment (i.e., bullshit detector) to perceive that the initial report was bogus, and the self-restraint and decency to react in a socially responsible manner. And so they were rightly fired, but the damage to the body politic had already been done. And here we sit nearly seven years after the Newtown horror and the families of victims are still forced to deal with internet troll bastards who attack them personally and exacerbate the families' sorrow and pain while desecrating the memories of the victims.

How are the trolls (it's open for debate whether these pieces of excrement are actual human beings) able to accomplish their nefarious ends? With social media, that's how. The internet is where liars, fools, manipulators, conspiracy theorists, and all-around horrible human beings have a platform to spout their falsehoods and hate to millions of gullible people who lack the knowledge and intellectual capacity to tell fact from fiction, and the restraint to react to negative information in a responsible manner. I almost feel sorry for the guy who drove from North Carolina to a pizza joint in D.C. to shoot a hole in the ceiling of the place because he imagined that he was rescuing children from a Clinton-led sex trafficking ring. He didn't make up this ludicrous nonsense; someone else (who almost certainly didn't believe it) did. But he saw it on the internet and swallowed the lie whole, because he lacked the thoughtfulness and intellectual maturity to question his own and others' beliefs. Unfortunately, so do a lot of other people.

The internet and social media sound good in theory and, to be fair, there is a lot to be gained by many people by going online. But the downside has been horrific and it

doesn't seem to be getting any better. In our current state of evolution, too many people are unable to handle the reams of misinformation (much of it intentional) that gets thrown at them when they go online. They either retreat to believing nothing because it's all too cacophonous for them, or, even worse, they believe anything that confirms and even glorifies their preconceived notions, no matter how obviously ridiculous that information is.

Can anything be done about this dangerous state of affairs? Well, secular humanists are already doing their bit, just by being and talking about who they are. That's because secular humanists base their thinking on reason, facts, and critical analysis. On the other hand, our religious brethren are uniquely susceptible to online conspiracy theories. That's because the religious act on "faith", and so don't require facts for their beliefs, whereas secular humanists rely only on evidence. If there is no direct evidence that Trump is a space alien sent to soften up Earth for the coming intergalactic invasion, then I won't believe it no matter how much I hate Trump. But someone who takes things on "faith" can easily believe in a child sex ring run from the basement of a pizza shop that doesn't actually have a basement.

The ability and willingness to analyze in a critical manner is simply not in religion's DNA; if it was, there would be no religion. Instead, religion actually celebrates believing in things for which there is no evidence. And the wide open internet facilitates the proliferation of beliefs that have no basis in fact. In the old, pre-internet days a person with preposterous beliefs might send a letter to the editor of his local newspaper. It might have gotten printed, but probably not, especially if it was inflammatory and/or untrue. But a fact-free screed on the internet can be sent, and reach a hell of a lot more people than that letter to the editor ever would or could. This is the danger. Our response needs to be what it so often needs to be when human beings go awry: fighting hate, bigotry, fear and violence with reason, science, education, justice, and decency.

THE CRACKPOTS ON THE INTERNET ARE NOT ALL HARMLESS.

Angela Saini

(Reprinted from "The Internet Is a Cesspool of Racist Pseudoscience", at blogs.scientificamerican.com, 7/29/19)

If anything, the public debate around race and science has sunk into the mud. To state even the undeniable fact that we are one human species today means falling afoul of a cabal of conspiracy theorists. The "race realists", as they call themselves online, join the growing ranks of climate change deniers, anti-vaxxers and flat-earthers in insisting that science is under the yoke of some grand master plan designed to pull the wool over everyone's eyes. In their case, a left-wing plot to promote racial equality when, as far as they're concerned, racial equality is impossible for biological reasons. ...

As the media landscape flattens, drawing audiences away from traditional outlets to a plethora of online ones,

those with outdated views have found themselves elevated from the lonely shadows into the light. They have moved on from letters in green ink and pulled up a seat alongside reputable writers and academics. The internet has opened the door to racists and sexists, and they have happily walked in. They're trampling over our carpets with their grubby shoes even as we offer them a drink. They have normalized extremism, pseudoscience and crackpottery.

What has started with a gentle creep through the back door of our computers could end, if we're not careful, with jackboots through the front door of our homes. Populism, ethnic nationalism and neo-Nazism are on the rise worldwide. If we are to prevent the mistakes of the past from happening again, we need to be more vigilant. The public must hold the Internet giants to account, recognize hatred dressed up as scholarship and learn how to marginalize it, and be assiduous in squeezing out pseudoscience from public debate. This is not a free speech issue; it's about improving the quality and accuracy of information that people see online, and thereby creating a fairer, kinder society.

Comment: Although I agree with Ms. Saini about the abuse of the internet and the lies and deceptions of the extremists and the crackpots, Yes, this is a free speech issue. We don't have a First Amendment and a tradition of a free marketplace of ideas in this country to protect the ideas we all agree on. We protect the right of everyone, even the Nazis, the anti-vaxxers, and the Christians, to peddle their ideas – subject only to the "inciting-to-riot" restriction. The only effective weapon against bad speech is more free speech; the most powerful weapon against lies, the truth (see Harry Truman, page 11). – JR

ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Stephen Hawking

(Excerpted, on [Delanceyplace.com](https://delanceyplace.com), from Brief Answers to the Big Questions, 2018)

I think there is no significant difference between how the brain of an earthworm works and how a computer computes. I also believe that evolution implies there can be no qualitative difference between the brain of an earthworm and that of a human. It therefore follows that computers can, in principle, emulate human intelligence, or even better it. It's clearly possible for something to acquire higher intelligence than its ancestors: we evolved to be smarter than our ape-like ancestors, and Einstein was smarter than his parents.

If computers continue to obey Moore's Law, doubling their speed and memory capacity every eighteen months, the result is that computers are likely to overtake humans in intelligence at some point in the next hundred years. When an artificial intelligence (AI) becomes better than humans at AI design, so that it can recursively improve itself without human help, we may face an intelligence explosion that ultimately results in machines whose intelligence exceeds ours by more than ours exceeds that of snails.

When that happens, we will need to ensure that the computers have goals aligned with ours. It's tempting to

dismiss the notion of highly intelligent machines as mere science fiction, but this would be a mistake, and potentially our worst mistake ever. ...

While primitive forms of artificial intelligence developed so far have proved very useful, I fear the consequences of creating something that can match or surpass humans. The concern is that AI would take off on its own and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete and would be superseded.

And in the future AI could develop a will of its own, a will that is in conflict with ours. Others believe that humans can command the rate of technology for a decently long time, and that the potential of AI to solve many of the world's problems will be realized.

Although I am well known as an optimist regarding the human race, I am not so sure.

WHY I TAG SO MANY ARTICLES HEREIN "YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS SHIT STUFF UP"

John Rafferty

When one morning last month I logged on and learned that convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein had been found dead in his cell at the Manhattan Correctional Center, an apparent suicide, I had a vagrant thought: The internet would undoubtedly soon be cluttered with right-wing conspiracy theories about "the suicide"; why not go online and make up a prank left-leaning plot?

But who, which reactionary politician or Bible-banging fundamentalist, should I blame for the murder/suicide? And immediately Facebook had the answer. Everyone.

"Theories" were up, running, and rife before I'd finished reading the news. Who killed Jeffrey Epstein? Donald Trump, of course, who's been seen on tape partying with the pervert back in the day, and who as President today could order a CIA "wet works" team to strangle (literally) any further investigation.

Or how about Epstein's fellow hound dog Bill Clinton, for the same coverup reasons?

Ooh, ooh, Prince Harry — he's actually *named* in indictments, so maybe the British royal family ...

The Russians! *Russians*? Right there on Facebook, at the head of a feed with more than thirty comments, was a confused and convoluted "analysis" that ended with "Looks like the Russians to me."

And George Soros. I have no idea why, except that the conservative half of the country hates George Soros anyway, even if they don't know why.

Who else? Epstein's brother Mark ... various victims of Epstein's Ponzi schemes ... a psychopath prison guard ... radical feminist ninjas.

And Hilary! Because, well, Hilary.

Everyone except little green space aliens. So far.

And what lesson can we draw from all that, class?

That we're a nation of imbeciles, that's what.

But wait! What if one of those nutjob theories is true?

Doesn't matter, we're still imbeciles.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE LIES

Ruben Bolling

(Transcribed from a Tom the Dancing Bug cartoon, "Donald and John: A Boy President and His Imaginary Publicist")

Imaginary Publicist: You're in trouble for racist tweets.

Donald, the Boy President: Then I'll distract 'em with a tweet about Russia.

Imaginary Publicist: Now you're in trouble for what you said about Russian collusion.

Donald, the Boy President: Then I'll distract 'em with the sex assault issue.

Imaginary Publicist: Now you're in trouble for your sex assault issue.

Donald, the Boy President: Then I'll distract 'em with a racist tweet.

Imaginary Publicist: That's what you started trying to distract people from.

Donald, the Boy President: So what? It's the distracting that matters.

HOW DOES DONALD TRUMP CHANGE A LIGHT BULB?

He doesn't, that involves work. He'll lie that he changed it, and his worshippers will sit in the dark and agree.

TRUMP, GREENLAND, DENMARK. IS THIS REAL LIFE? OR A PETER SELLERS MOVIE?

(Excerpted from *The New York Times* editorial 8/21/2019)

I want to buy Greenland, said President Trump. No way, I said the Danes and Greenlanders, who share control over the giant frozen island and its rich mineral treasures, calling the idea "absurd". Then I'm not going to visit your queen, shot back the self-proclaimed master of the real estate deal, calling the Danish Prime Minister a "nasty" woman.

Comment: Aww ... did the nasty Danish lady hurt Donald's feelings? Then no state visit by the 6-year-old Master of the Universe. And he really didn't want the old island, anyway! -- JR

WOULD JIMMY CARTER LIE?

At a Carter Center event on human rights in Virginia a historian John Meacham asked 94-year-old former President Jimmy Carter if he believed the Russians interfered in the 2016 election.

Carter: There is no doubt they did. ... I think the interference, although not yet quantified, if fully investigated, would show that Trump didn't actually win the election in 2016. He lost the election, and he was put into office because the Russians interfered on his behalf.

Does Carter think Trump is "an illegitimate president"?

Carter: Yes.

It's official: THE U.S. IS A "SHITOLE COUNTRY" Michael Stone

Amnesty International issued a Travel Advisory on August 7 warning visitors to the U.S. to avoid "cultural events, places of worship, schools, and shopping malls" due to "ongoing high levels of gun violence in the country".

WE ONCE HAD A PRESIDENT NAMED TRUMAN David McCullough

(Both excerpts are from Truman, McCullough's masterly biography of the 33rd President of the United States.)

One morning at Blair House, [Truman] read in the papers that the body of an American soldier killed in action, Sergeant John Rice, had been brought home for burial in Sioux City, Iowa, but that at the last moment, as the casket was to be lowered into the grave, officials of the Sioux City Memorial Park had stopped the ceremony because Sergeant Rice, a Winnebago Indian, was not "a member of the Caucasian race" and burial was therefore denied.

Outraged, Truman picked up the phone. Within minutes, by telephone and telegram, it was arranged that Sergeant Rice would be buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors and that an Air Force plane was on the way to bring his widow and three children to Washington. That, as president, was the least he could do.

• • •

One night in the dining room at Blair House, Truman had called a secret meeting [to solicit] confidential advice. What could be done about [Senator Joe] McCarthy?

Senator Clinton Anderson mentioned a "devastating" dossier that had been assembled on McCarthy, complete with details on his bedmates over the years, enough to "blow Senator McCarthy's whole show sky high". Suggestions were made that the material be leaked to the press. But Truman smacked the table with the flat of his hand, and as [historian/author John] Hersey remembered, "His third-person self spoke in outrage: the President wanted no more such talk."

Three pungent comments of Harry Truman's on the proposal that had just been made have stuck in my mind ever since [Hersey would write]. This was their gist:

You must not ask the President of the United States to get down in the gutter with a guttersnipe.

Nobody, not even the President of the United States, can approach too close to a skunk, in skunk territory, and expect to get anything out of it except a bad smell.

If you think somebody is telling a big lie about you, the only way to answer is with the whole truth.

AND NOW WE HAVE DONALD TRUMP

"Nobody's ever been more successful than me."

"The beauty of me is that I'm very rich."

"Nobody has more respect for women than Donald Trump."

"China has total respect for Donald Trump and for Donald Trump's very, very large brain."

"Sorry losers and haters, but my IQ is one of the highest."

"There's never been a president like President Trump."

"Nobody has ever done so much in the first two years of a presidency as this administration. Nobody. Nobody."

"I am the chosen one."

OF-THE-MONTH AWARDS John Rafferty

We continue our monthly roundup of idiocies not important enough for full-column-length tsk-tsks, but irrational, dumb, or just plain creepy enough for negative notice herein. Readers are encouraged — please! — to contribute what examples they may come across, to editor@shsny.org.

Demographer-of-the-Month

Donald J. Trump, talking to reporters July 11 about the conditions at the border detention centers, explained that ...

"... they're crowded because there are lots of people."

Presidential Advisor-of-the-Month

Trump "spiritual adviser" Paula White — this woman has access to the Oval Office! — says she can make the ground she's standing on into a magic Jesus-zone.

"The White House becomes holy ground when I stand on it."

Historian-of-the-Month

Despite a public outcry, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee (R) signed a proclamation declaring July 13 as Nathan Bedford Forrest Day in the state, honoring the former slave owner, traitorous Confederate general, and first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, who, the governor says, was ...

"... a recognized military figure in American history and a native Tennessean."

Oh, well, okay then.

Ethnologist-of-the-Month

Representative Mike Kelly (R-PA), while complaining about identity politics (although he's probably too dumb to understand the term), redefines his own ancestry.

"They talk about people of color. I'm a person of color."

I'm white. I'm an Anglo-Saxon."

Really? Kelly? Mike Kelly? Anglo-Saxon?

Western Heritage Expert-of-the-Month

On a momentous day for Tribal Nations, Congresswoman Liz Cheney (R-WY), the House Republican Conference Chairwoman, complained that successful litigation by the tribes and environmentalists to return the grizzly bear to the Endangered Species Act "was not based on science or facts". Instead, she said, the Native Americans were ...

"... intent on destroying our Western way of life."

Um ... whose "Western way of life", Liz?

Fearless Educator-of-the-Month

Principal William Latson of Spanish River High School in Florida addressed the beliefs of Holocaust-denying parents.

"Not everyone believes the Holocaust happened ...

not all of our parents have the same beliefs. ... I can't say the Holocaust is a factual, historical event because I am not in a position to do so as a school district employee."

And we couldn't resist this beauty from abroad ...

Sexologist-of-the-Month

Church of Cyprus bishop Neophytos Masouras of Morphou told an audience in Akaki, Cyprus, that homosexuality is caused by pregnant women enjoying anal sex, declaring:

"It follows an abnormal sexual act between the parents. To be more clear, anal sex. Saint Porphyrios says when the woman likes that, a desire is born, and is passed on to the child."

NEW YORK'S OWN "GREEN NEW DEAL"

Adam Lee

(Excerpted from "New York's Green New Deal", on *patheos.com*, 7/31/2019)

New York is the fourth most populous state in the US and its third-largest economy. Now it is poised to adopt the country's most ambitious climate targets, including 100 percent carbon-free electricity by 2040 and economy-wide, net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

The Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, passed and signed, commits the state to a hugely ambitious set of goals: 70 percent renewable energy by 2030, 100 percent carbon-free electricity by 2040, and zero total carbon emissions across the entire economy by 2050. At least 85 percent of the reductions have to come from cleaning up existing industries, with the last 15 percent supplied by carbon-offset projects like reforestation.

New York isn't the first state to set ambitious targets. Several others, like California, Washington, New Mexico and Hawaii, were already working toward 100 percent clean energy. ... New York's law also contains some strong social-justice provisions. It echoes the Green New Deal in mandating that investments in clean energy—job-training, manufacturing, installation—be made in disadvantaged communities that have borne the brunt of pollution and

climate change:

It is a win for the state's economy, which will see a boom in innovation and investment. It's a win for environmental justice, shifting state funding to those most vulnerable. And it's a win for the climate. ...

As of now, the West Coast's biggest state economy and the East Coast's biggest are heading for carbon neutrality by midcentury. In between them, a patchwork of climate-forward states is forming. ... Connecticut will join New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts in leading the effort to build a \$70 billion offshore wind industry along the Atlantic seaboard, transforming the way the region gets its electricity. Combined, they have plans to add more than 25 gigawatts over the next 15 years. ...

There's a common thread among these states, and you can sum it up in one word: Democrats. New York's law was only passed after Democrats swept the legislature in 2018, breaking a decades-long logjam caused by Republicans clinging to power in the state senate.

This ought to be the issue that eclipses all others in importance. The decisions we make in the next few decades will shape humanity's future for centuries to come.

Comment: Three cheers, and about damned time. This is the sure and smart way to fight back against Trump, the climate denialist idiots, and the polluters. – JR

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