

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May 26, 2020

Another abbreviated newsletter for our abbreviated lives. Whatever, as herein we compare a 500 year-old plague to our own, unmask Liars for Jesus and question the logic of Christianity, the Pope's job performance and the qualifications of Trump's latest council of dunderheads. We debate the rights and wrongs of peeing on other people's carpets, offer electronic delivery of PIQUE, and play a game with toasters. But first, we scream against the obscenity of riches in tragic times. —JR

A BILLIONAIRE BONANZA and AN (IM)MODEST PROPOSAL John Rafferty

(Inspired by Harper's Weekly Review, 5/19/2020)

On May 13 Federal Reserve Chair Jerome H. Powell said that almost 40 percent of U.S. households making less than \$40,000 a year lost a job in March.

And the Institute for Policy Studies reported that between March 18 and May 14 U.S. billionaires saw their wealth *increase* by \$368.8 billion, a 12.51 percent increase.

Jeff Bezos of Amazon became \$10 billion *richer* in that period; Elon Musk, of Tesla and SpaceX, is *up* \$5 billion.

Those numbers are not about how much the billionaires are worth, but about how much *richer* they've gotten in just the couple of months since we all started worrying about the economy and our very security – and some of us died.

That's disgraceful.

Please, Free-Marketeer Reader, don't quote Friedrich Hayek or Ayn Rand to me. Theory be damned – people are losing their livelihoods (many of which are never coming back), and with them their pitifully poor, ridiculously expensive health care. In the midst of a pandemic that is killing millions, they can't afford to see a doctor.

That's disgusting.

And please, Liberal-Left Reader, I've had all I can take of "We're all in this together". Save it for your 7pm pot-banging, high-rise celebration of the "heroes" ten stories below who collect your garbage and deliver your take-out for wages that don't support their families.

While we Zoom with friends and "work from home", they work the streets at two (or more) dangerous jobs to feed their children.

"Together" my ass.

Immodest Proposal:

TAX THE OBSCENELY RICH!

We – that is the federal government (once we elect some leadership) – are going to need money – *a lot of money* – to avoid not just a 1930s-type Depression, but a complete societal collapse.

We need a permanent Universal Basic Income (*Thank you, Andrew Yang, and will you please run the program?*) to save from starvation the tens of millions for whom there simply won't be jobs in a stripped-down new economy, e.g., Who needs sales clerks in online retailing?

We're going to need continuing massive infusions of federal money to keep open small businesses – your local diner, barber shop, shoe store – that have been shut down for months but still have to pay rent and phone bills.

We're going to need even more money to solve problems we can't even guess at yet because our very society has changed/is changing before our eyes. You think we're going to go back to *not* wearing masks? Go back to greeting even casual acquaintances with handshakes and hugs?

Where do we get the money? For starters, with a ten percent (*at least!*) levy on all personal wealth in excess of one billion dollars* – how's that for simplicity?

More "radical"? Reverse Reagan's infamous "tax reform" of 1984, when he reduced the top rate from 70 percent to 28 (and levied the first-ever income tax of social security benefits to make up for it). *Seventy* percent!

And throw in a "sales tax" of one-half of one percent on every one of the tens of millions of transactions that are made every day on our stock exchanges.

Those will do for starters.

Okay, your opinion, Reader, to editor@shsny.org
**Of course this doesn't apply to Donald Trump because he's as much a billionaire as I am an astronaut brain surgeon. – JR.*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

Jonathan Engel, *Pres.*; John Wagner, *V.P.*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secy/Treas.*; John Rafferty, *Editor/Pres. Emeritus*
Nancy Adelman, Kiwi Callahan, Dorothy Kahn, Carl Marxer, David Orenstein
SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / www.shsny.org

Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only: \$30; Student: \$20.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived at www.shsny.org. Original-to-PIQUE articles may be reprinted, in full or in part.
SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI),
an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI),
and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

WHEN DID REPUBLICANS BECOME ANARCHISTS?

Jonathan Engel

Anarchy as a political mindset is usually associated with whatever remains of the far left. It conjures up images of masked (though not for health reasons) black-clad disrupters running through the streets, smashing windows, turning over cars, etc.. Now, I grew up thinking of conservative Republicans as country club types who revere the status quo and insist on law and order (at least for hippies and black folks; in the boardroom and on their tax returns it was a different matter). So it's a bit disorienting to see Republicans screaming that the American idea of "freedom" means that they can do whatever they want, whenever they want.

I thought of this while reading the type of news item that has become quite ubiquitous these days. In a Las Vegas Costco a shopper was asked to wear a mask and refused, stating "I'm not wearing a mask because I woke up in a free country," to which he added a string of threats and obscenities directed at the store clerk who had politely asked him to mask-up. I wonder what the aggrieved shopper would have to say if I walked into his house and peed on his carpet (apologies to "The Big Lebowski"). It's a free country, isn't it? Why can't I pee wherever I want? You mean this guy is allowed to have a rule in his own home: *NO PEEING ON THE CARPET?*

Yes. And Costco is allowed to have a rule: *NO UNMASKED CUSTOMERS*. All societies balance freedom to act as one wishes with the need for a just and orderly society. And clearly there have been times when government in this country has gotten that balance wrong, in both directions. But your right to swing your fist ends at my nose. Period.

MEET TRUMP'S COUNCIL TO REOPEN AMERICA

Alphabetically, they are: Larry Kudlow, Jared Kushner, Robert Lighthizer, Mark Meadows, Steven Mnuchin, Steven Ross, and Ivanka Trump.

By qualification they are: a former congressman, a lawyer, two financiers, one successful and one failed real estate developer, and a failed fashion entrepreneur.

Not one doctor. Not one public health expert. Not one scientist. Not one national security expert. Not one person of color. Not one person qualified for this moment.

TWO MORE CHEERS FOR ANDREW CUOMO

Not that it matters much personally to readers of PIQUE, but as of May 21st, religious gatherings of no more than 10 people are now allowed statewide in New York. Social distancing measures must be enforced and all participants must wear masks.

The state is convening an Interfaith Advisory Council to discuss proposals to safely bring back religious services.

Comment: Can SHSNY maybe get a seat on the Council and vote – for mental health reasons – against ever bringing back religious gatherings in New York? – JR

A YEAR OF PLAGUE: THEN AND NOW

Jia Tolentino

(Editor: The following is excerpted from "The Mysterious 'Sweating Sickness' in Hilary Mantel's 'Wolf Hall' Trilogy and the Private Country of Illness", on newyorker.com, 5/20/2020. I could not help but recognize the similarity of fears, attitudes, and magical thinking between Henry VIII's (and Thomas Cromwell's) England of 1527 and Donald Trump's America today. – JR)

"The warm weather has brought sweating sickness to London, and the city is emptying," [Mantel] writes. The "gossip in the shops is all about pills and infusions, and friars in the streets are doing a lucrative trade in holy medals. This plague came to us in the year 1485, with the armies that brought us the first Henry Tudor. Now every few years it fills the graveyards. It kills in a day. Merry at breakfast, they say: dead by noon."

One day that summer, the sweating sickness kills Cromwell's wife, Liz: he comes home to find her corpse on the bed, her jaw bound with linen, the whole house smelling like burning herbs. Liz has to be buried quickly, with no funeral permissible; the family is supposed to hang a bundle of straw outside the house as a sign of infection, to restrict entry for forty days, and to keep themselves at home. Cromwell's mother-in-law suggests, tentatively, that they don't have to admit that Liz had sweating sickness – they could cite another cause of death, forgo the straw, and go on with their lives. "If we all stayed at home, London would come to a standstill," she says. But, in the end, the family follows precautions. Cromwell stays in his room, reading Petrarch and Machiavelli. The plague passes lightly over London, and, in September, the family gathers to mourn Liz.

The next summer, the sweating sickness returns. "People say, as they did last year, that you won't get it if you don't think about it," Cromwell observes. They're wrong, of course, and he sends his two daughters away from London. Infection reaches Henry VIII's court, and Henry leaves, trying to "outride the plague, moving from one hunting lodge to the next". He's in the midst of trying to replace Catherine of Aragon with Anne Boleyn, the latter of whom goes off to the country, to self-isolate at a family estate. She gets infected, but recovers quickly; Henry, who has a powerful fear of illness, declines to visit, sending his best.

Magical thinking pervades the royal universe, and extends to matters of illness: rubies, people say, will ward off the plague. Henry's men, eager to understand the fate of their country, pore over the king's astrological chart; they map a comet's progress across the sky and consult a nun who claims to communicate with the dead.

Comment: The final book of Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy, The Light and the Mirror, is a selection of the SHSNY Fiction Book Club for fall. – JR

And: How have visual artists depicted plague over the centuries? Joel Galker has sent us this intriguing link: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200514-how-art-has-depicted-plagues?ocid=ww.social.link.email>

IF

(Based on "Corona Virus live Updates", NYTimes, 5/21/202)

If the United States had begun imposing social-distancing measures one week earlier in March, about 36,000 fewer people would have died in the pandemic, according to new estimates from Columbia University disease modelers.

And if the country had begun locking down cities and limiting social contact on March 1, two weeks earlier than when most people started staying home, a vast majority of the nation's deaths — about 83 percent — would have been avoided, the researchers estimated.

	In the U.S.	In NYC
• Total reported deaths on May 3:	65,307	17,581
• Estimated deaths on May 3 if social distancing started one week earlier than it did:	29,410	2,838

Bottom line: While an inept and vainglorious president dithered and lied, ignored science, and disputed any arithmetic that might impact negatively on his reelection, 36,000 Americans died unnecessarily, including nearly 15,000 of our friends and neighbors right here in New York.

And of course the above numbers are as of May 3. Well before June 3 the total U.S. deaths will total more than 100,000 (USA, USA! We're Number 1!). How I wish there really was a Hell waiting for this malicious monster. — JR

THEY HAD A PHILO DEPARTMENT?

Hemant Mehta

(Based on *friendlyatheist.patheos.com*, 5/12/2020)

But you didn't know that the Jerry Falwell-founded Liberty University offered a Philosophy degree. Well, yeah, it did, until current Liberty U. president Jerry Falwell, Jr., just this month fired the whole Philo department. If you're wondering why, just consider how the department is described on the school's website:

"The philosophy degree at Liberty develops the whole person and will prepare you for a lifetime of problem-solving and critical thinking. When you major in philosophy, you'll gain practical skills in debate and dialogue.

"Learn to think and write clearly, argue a position with good reasons, interpret new data, and offer creative solutions. Develop your mind as an original thinker — someone who can think outside the box."

Critical thinking ... creative solutions ... original thinking ... Now do you understand?

Basically, Abrahamic religion belongs to the Middle Ages, and we're moving beyond that now. We're moving beyond wanting religion to do things it used to do. It used to have an explanatory role, but science has taken that place. It used to be the main source of beauty and awe, but art has taken that role. It used to be the main source of sanctions, but law has taken that role. What remains is what primitive people use it for — consolation and community-building.

— Brian Eno

THE TERRORISTS ARE WINNING

(They're just not who we were told to expect)

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Domestic Terrorists Force Michigan To Close Capitol, Cancel Legislative Session", 5/14/2020)

After threats of domestic terrorism from heavily armed militia groups, the Michigan capitol was forced to close and its scheduled legislative session was canceled. The groups planned to protest and possibly storm the capitol building in an attempt to intimidate Governor Gretchen Whitmer and other lawmakers responsible for extending the state's stay-at-home order.

In addition, plans by militia members to assassinate Whitmer were widely shared on social media prior to the gathering.

Detroit Metro Times gained access to four private Facebook groups that have a combined 400,000 members, and are filled with paranoid, sexist, and grammar-challenged rants, with members encouraging violence and flouting the governor's social-distancing orders. Assassinating Whitmer is a common theme. Dozens of people have called for her to be hanged, e.g.:

"We need a good old fashioned lynch mob to storm the Capitol, drag her tyrannical ass out onto the street and string her up as our forefathers would have."

"Drag that tyrant governor out to the front lawn. Fit her for a noose."

"Plain and simple she needs to eat lead."

Bottom line: After threats of domestic terrorism from heavily armed militia groups, the Michigan capitol was forced to close and its scheduled legislative session was canceled.

In short, the terrorists are winning.

Comment: *It's okay, don't worry — they're white, they're Right, and they just want to Make American Great Again.* — JR

READERS RESPOND ... AND SUGGEST

To the Editor: I love getting e-delivery of PIQUE. I usually dislike online subscriptions to magazines and newspapers because I find reading things on a screen uncomfortable and they're too voluminous to print. But PIQUE is just the right size for printing without feeling that I'm excessively killing trees and pigment-producing plants, and it gives me the ability to easily cut and paste quotations and excerpts that I want to share.

I'd be happy to save you some postage by e-subscribing if and when normality (?) returns. — *Harvey Wachtel*

Comment: *Long-time member Harvey will get PIQUE electronically when normality (?) returns. How about you, Reader? If you'd prefer PIQUE online, let me know at editor@shsny.org* — JR

We make our own purpose by finding our own values, creating rewarding lives with affectionate mates and children, pursuing solid careers, enjoying all the joys we can reap. A Unitarian seminar I once took was titled "Dancing Over the Dark Abyss." That's a formula for coping with the absurdity that engulfs us. — *James A. Haught*

LIARS FOR JESUS KNOW NO SHAME

John Rafferty

When Norma McCorvey, the woman whose fight for abortion rights manifested in *Roe v. Wade*, took a 180-degree turn in the 1980s, became an evangelical Christian, apologized tearfully for having tried to have an abortion, and became a loud, public anti-abortion crusader, we in the freedom-of-choice camp wished – we wanted so much – for it not to be true.

Well, it wasn't.

In a dramatic “deathbed confession”, McCorvey, who died in 2017, revealed to the makers of a just-released FX documentary, “AKA Jane Roe”, that leaders of the evangelical religious movement paid her to switch sides.

In fact, the filmmakers behind “AKA Jane Roe” uncovered documents revealing she received more than \$450,000 in gifts from [the anti-choice] movement.

“I was the big fish. I think it was a mutual thing. I took their money and they'd put me out in front of the cameras and tell me what to say. That's what I'd say. It was all an act. I did it well too. I am a good actress.”

In the film, a visibly ailing McCorvey restates her support for reproductive rights in colorful terms:

“If a young woman wants to have an abortion, that's no skin off my ass. That's why they call it choice.”

JOB PERFORMANCE

John Rafferty

On March 17 the worldwide Covid-19 infection number was under half a million, and Pope Francis, whose job titles are: Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the State of Vatican City, and Servant of the Servants of God, officially asked God to stop the epidemic. I mean, who better to ask God, right?

Yo, Francis, the number is now over 5.25 million infected, including 339,000 dead.

Francis, you think you may not be up to the jobs?

JESUS EXPLAINS CHRISTIANITY'S IRREFUTABLE LOGIC TO MOSES AND MO

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/comic/guys)

Moses: I have to say, Jesus, I don't believe this crucifixion-resurrection story of yours.

Mohammed: Me neither, Moses, we have that in common.

Jesus: You guys don't get it. My death and resurrection is the whole point of Christianity. If it didn't happen, Christianity isn't true.

Moses: Correct.

Mo: And ...

Jesus: And Christianity is true. Therefore my crucifixion and resurrection must have happened.

Moses: Wait ... how do you know Christianity is true?

Jesus: Because my death and resurrection proves it.

Moses: I need to go and lie down.

A WEEK OF TRUMPIAN WIT AND WISDOM

How To Reduce the Number of U.S. Coronavirus Cases

When you test, you have a case. When you test, you find something is wrong with people. If we didn't do any testing, we would have very few cases. And testing is overrated. – Donald J. Trump, V.S.G.

Guardian of the Potatoes

We're going after Virginia with your crazy governor. ... They want to take your Second Amendment away. You know that right? You'll have nobody guarding your potatoes. – Donald Trump, to VA farmers at the White House

Just Slap a “Women For Biden” On This One

When asked whether Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used staffers to run personal errands, he said:

I'd rather have him on the phone with some world leader than washing dishes because maybe his wife isn't there.

GAMES WE PLAY IN LOCKDOWN

Outraged that he had been momentarily inconvenienced by social-distancing rules (like Jon Engel's Costco shopper, page 2), a gentleman posted this pitiful story on Facebook:

“Dropped by a department store to buy a toaster oven. Mandatory hand sanitizer squirt and mask. One-way aisles and if you deviate from the approved zone they sternly lecture you. The country as we know it has been destroyed. And I still don't have a toaster.”

Poor baby: no country, no toaster. In response, one Stephen L. Miller suggested: “Pick a favorite movie quote, and add ‘... and I still don't have a toaster’ to it.” Like ...

“Houston, we have a problem, and I still don't have a toaster.”

“You can't handle the truth, and I still don't have a toaster.”

How about it, Readers? Please send your quote-and-toaster mashup(s) to editor@shsny.org.



SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY – AUGUST 2020

FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club meets online via Zoom, and will continue so for the duration of our enforced isolation.

To be included and notified of each meeting's link and password, email your address to Sharon Krutzel at sharonkrutzel@rcn.com

TUES, JUNE 9, 7:00 pm **LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE** Celeste Ng

A #1 *NYTimes* bestseller – and named a “best book of the year” by NPR, *Esquire*, Amazon, *The Washington Post* and on numerous other lists – *Little Fires Everywhere* explores the weight of secrets, the nature of art and identity, and the ferocious pull of motherhood – and the danger of believing that following the rules can avert disaster.

TUES, JULY 14, 7:00 pm **THE SHADOW KING** Maaza Mengiste

Set during Mussolini's 1935 Invasion of Ethiopia, *The Shadow King* takes us back to the first real conflict of World War II, casting light on the women soldiers who were left out of the historical record.

TUES, AUGUST 11, 7 pm **DOUBLE WHAMMY** Carl Hiaasen

Just for fun, follow the adventures of a news-photographer-turned-private-eye as he seeks truth, justice, and an affair with his ex-wife. A hilarious caper with unforgettable characters, including the lunatic ex-governor of Florida whose diet is roadkill.

HUMANIST BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We had our first online meeting May 7, and Zoom works! So we'll continue online for the duration of our social distancing, and Harry French will send the linking codes. Send him your address at: htfrench46@gmail.com
Meanwhile, do the reading ...

THURS, JUNE 4, 7:00 pm **MIND FIXERS:** *Psychiatry's Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness* Anne Harrington

A clear-eyed, evenhanded, and yet passionate tour de force, *Mind Fixers* recounts the past and present struggle to make mental illness a biological question.

Mind Fixers makes clear that psychiatry's waxing and waning biological enthusiasms have been shaped not just by developments in the clinic and lab, but also by a surprising range of social factors, including immigration, warfare, grassroots activism, and assumptions about race and gender.

– Paperback and Kindle available.

THURS, JULY 2, 7:00 pm **BELIEVERS** *Faith in Human Nature* Melvin Konner

Conceding that faith is not for everyone, anthropologist Konner views religious people with a sympathetic eye, examining the nature of religiosity, and how it shapes and benefits humankind.

Believers shows us that for at least a large minority of humanity, the belief in things unseen neither can nor should go away.

THURS, AUGUST 6, 7:00 pm *To Be Announced*

HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

SUN, MAY 24, 5:00 pm

Let's get together even when we can't get together in a virtual Happy Hour (or longer) via Zoom. Get comfortable at your computer with your beverage of choice, and/or Cheetos or cookies or M&Ms – whatever makes you happy – and join (we have no idea how many fellow humanists in our Humanist Happy Hour!

Zoom in at ...

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86099801520?pwd=U3FHcFlXK3J3QitXMXNMSWhzSk5Ldz09>

Meeting ID: 860 9980 1520

Password: 731848

SHSNY BRUNCH & CONVERSATION and GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

... will not be offered while we're social distancing. Meanwhile ...

LIKE SHSNY ON FACEBOOK

<https://www.facebook.com/SHSofNY>

MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS_NewYork

