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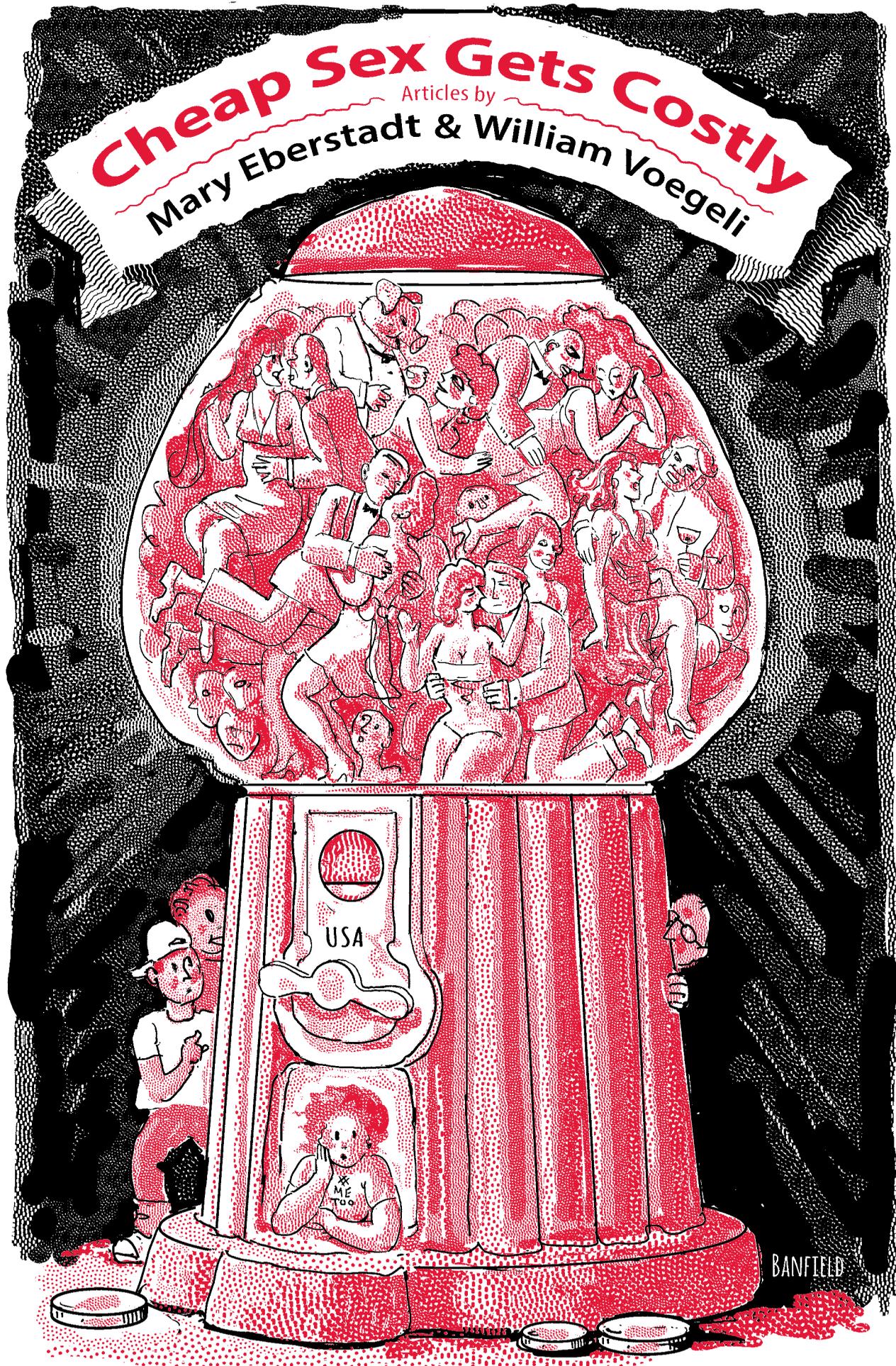
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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



The Road to iSerfdom

THE HOUSE OF LIBERTY IS CUSTOMARILY DEFENDED ABOVE GROUND, where its constitutional structure and the cladding of the laws are easily apparent. But if its deeper foundations—which are the individual’s appreciation, expectation, and exercise of liberty, autonomy, and agency—begin to rot, it will collapse. As political and legal battles are fought at the surface, the foundations of liberty are washing away.

Recent generations especially, their elders in tow, are racing upon a digital track to exchange their powers, liberty, and privacy for pathetic simulations of fame, counterfeit means of intimacy and connection that instead foster distance and isolation, supposed simplification that gives birth to meaningless complexity, conveniences that require submission and erode skills, and an ever-growing reliance on corporate behemoths with no spur to guard anyone’s rights or interests but their own.

The pace is torrid and on a mass scale involving most of the population. With the more sophisticated among them crusading against “big corporations,” people nonetheless entrust their financial records and holdings, correspondence, photographs, diaries, love letters, productive work, and health data to a “cloud.” That is, to the vast computer farms of a few companies that also know, *inter alia*, where they are, what they buy, what they read, what they want, their associations, their opinions, and where they plan to go and when.

More and more, these trusting souls receive news and information that, because it is tailored to their prejudices, becomes as pleasurable as a drug and renders them almost as manipulable as addicts. With the public’s reliance upon, and limp acceptance of, the increasing centralization of information, the greatest transfer of power in human history has begun. And not surprisingly, the first waves of passivity have broken upon us. No matter if you cannot read a map, cook a chicken, or drive a car, these and a thousand other things will be done for you by your apps or by others in the “gig economy.” Spell-checkers will correct your spelling (often stupidly), grammar-checkers will correct your grammar (often wrongly). Cursive disappeared, then any kind of penmanship, and soon voice recognition will make keyboards obsolete, as your hands slowly lose their cunning.

Recently, I was in the New York subway, where every person in my car (except me) was staring at a smartphone. On the street, I did an informal census. Almost half the people appeared to have been self-conversing schizophrenics or zombies staring at their screens. If you don’t dodge, they bump into you. Google, Amazon, and Apple—the future three branches of government (Facebook already is the church)—market devices that, connected to their banks of mainframes, are listening 24 hours a day to every sound in the house. Supposedly, though they listen to be awakened, they listen only when you awaken them. Your emails are machine-read so your ads can be bespoke, but Alexa and her sisters won’t ever listen in. This we know because history teaches that governments and corporations never experience such temptations.

There are so many examples of such high-pressure, ubiquitous penetration and embrace—like water rushing into a breached submarine—and they are so well known to everyone, that it is necessary only to cite the *Wall Street Journal’s* benediction in regard to Amazon alone: “The leviathan has been...building new inroads into our homes and families.”

BY NOW, GENERATIONS HAVE ARISEN THAT NOT ONLY SUBMIT TO programming and direction—following routines as faithfully as pigeons pecking for corn—they energetically seek its many instances, count them as virtues and victories, and are proud of slipping their trust to anonymous others who dangle before them promises of relief from work, effort, inquiry, responsibility, and action. They do this, on minor and major scales, according to the geometrically waxing pace of technology and the surrender to it of education, politics, the humanities, and, most importantly, the individual. Which is not to mention what would happen if our newfound digital utopia were subjected to two or three well placed nuclear airbursts creating a coast-to-coast electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) attack. Not since Jamestown has our splendid enterprise in the New World been subject to such easy erasure.

Like villains in bad action movies, who run out and pause to be shot, the inhabitants of developed countries—some more, some less, not least our own—are diving headlong into luxurious serfdom, all the while protesting the privacy breaches they invite and the inequality they disparage—both of which are the obvious consequences of promiscuously assigning one’s capacities to others. One might suspect that this rapidly swelling way of life would blend seamlessly with any political philosophy that requires intense cooperation, central direction, and general obedience. And one would be right.

As cities worldwide absorb the inflow of rural populations, the need for cooperation and coordination in crowded spaces sets the tone for entire nations. We see this in the chasm between Democratic cities (and dense suburbs), and the more spacious Republican precincts. Except for the fact that younger people everywhere are “urbanized” by increasingly efficient digital highways, predictions of the political future based primarily on sectionalism and traditional demographics will be far less accurate than those giving the most weight to urbanization. Urban concentrations have always been disproportionately influential in determining political, social, and economic directions, but that power is increasing by orders of magnitude as the reach afforded by technology and the surrender of autonomy steadily tint even the outlands “blue.”

In short, the regimentation that machines bring in train is winning. Not because we are arrayed against it in some sort of losing battle of the dystopian future, but because in the present we are rushing to surrender ourselves with speed and passion that not long ago would have been, respectively, impossible and inexplicable. And for every protest against the new serfdom, there will be a million self-impugning attestations to its addictive luxuries.

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