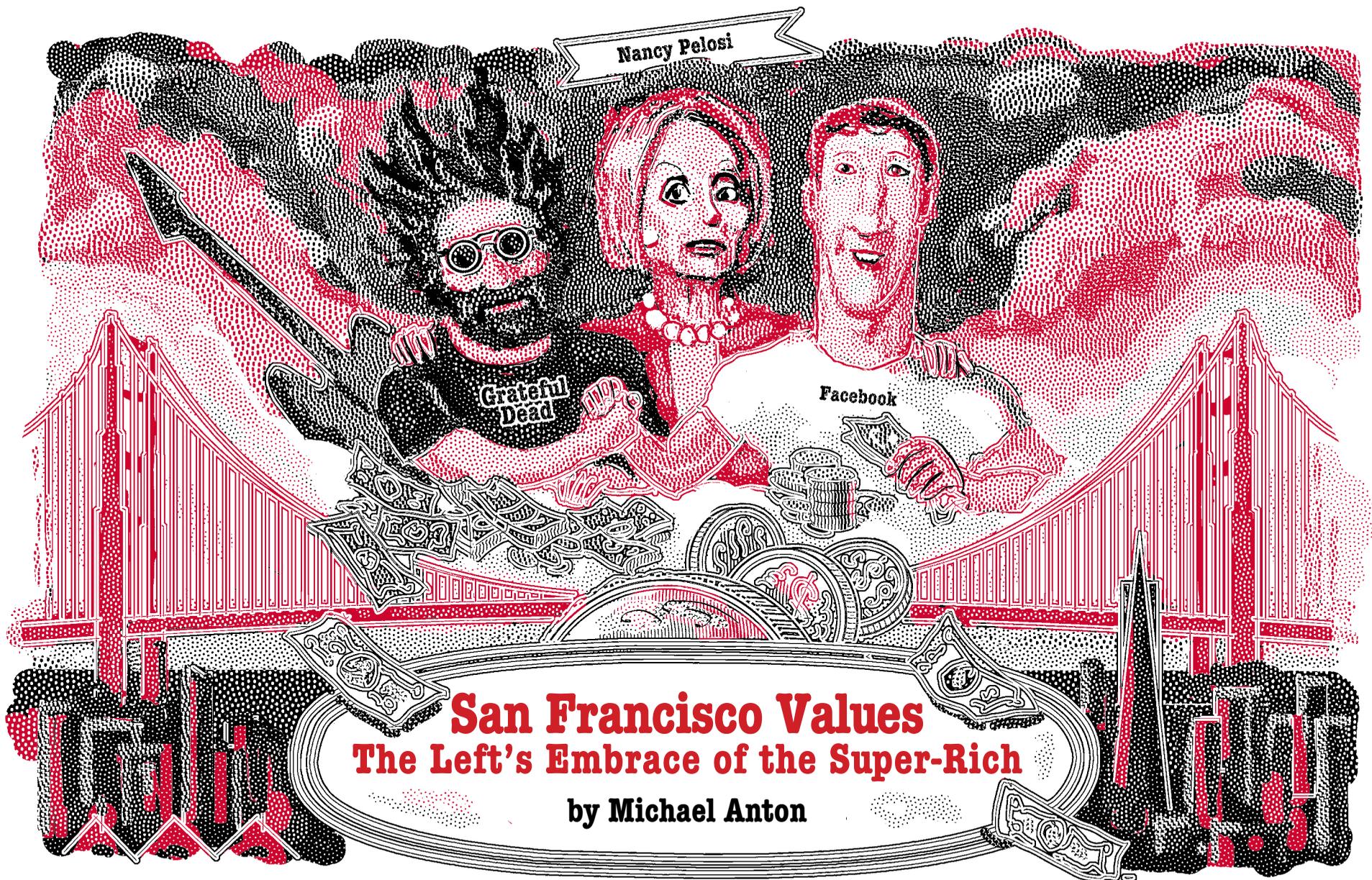


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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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by Michael Anton

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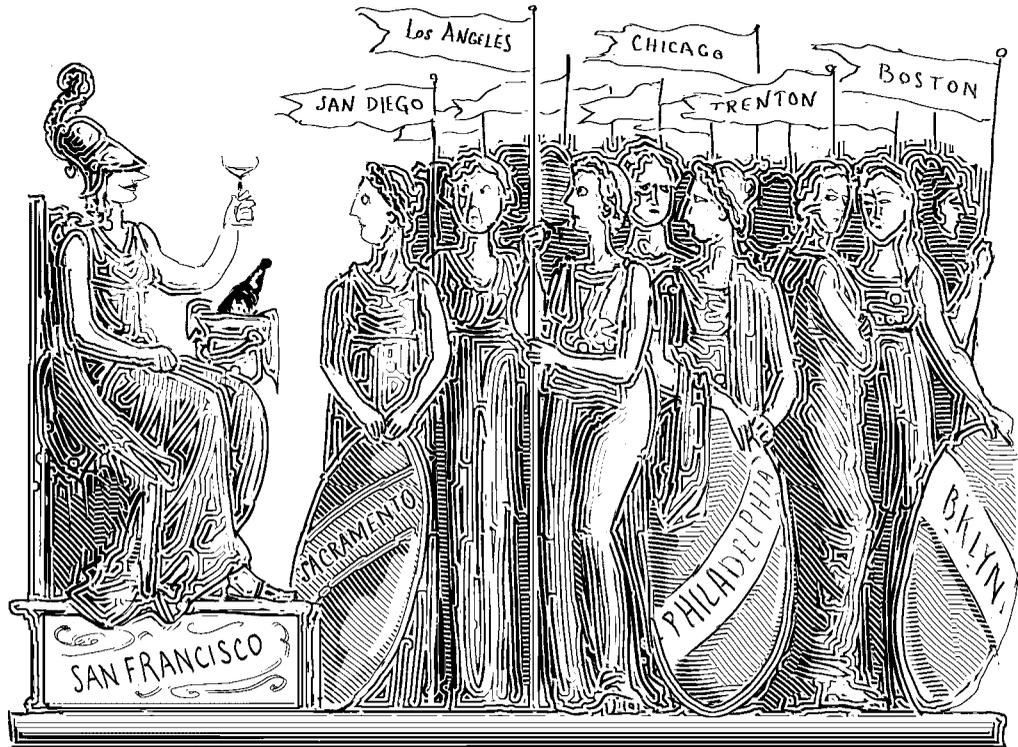


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## SAN FRANCISCO VALUES



“NETSCAPE OPENED AT WHAT?!” Legendary Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia probably didn’t say those words just before dying of a massive heart attack at the Serenity Knolls drug treatment center in Marin County, California, on August 9, 1995.

Yet that was the same day as Netscape’s initial public offering, the Coloma strike of the dot-com gold rush. Priced at \$28—nearly twice the going rate for tech stocks—the shares zoomed to \$75 before closing their first trading session at \$58.

Inured as we have become to instant internet riches, it requires an effort of imagination to recall how shocking this was at the time. Hence the mordant joke that began floating around Bay Area tech and venture capital circles: “What were Jerry Garcia’s last words?”

The alleged reply being too good to check, it has been printed widely—if he didn’t say it, he should have. Nothing could better encapsulate the spirit of a time and place. Jerome John Garcia—born and bred in San Francisco—was for 30 years a living embodiment of the “counterculture” that, too, was born, or at least raised, there. His Grateful Dead started out as the house jam band for Ken Kesey’s “acid tests,” 72-hour (sometimes longer) drug-fueled raves intended as religious

rites to sanctify a new enlightened age. For some, the party never ended as they followed the band from concert to concert, town after town, state after state, year after year.

The lifestyle took its toll: on fans, on the band, not least on Jerry himself. But in the mid-1980s Garcia (temporarily) kicked his heroin habit, got his life in order, and for the first time set the Dead’s financial interests on a sound footing through a series of shrewd business deals. These included a line of mass-marketed neckties (an improbable endeavor for a hippie who, in his entire life, had worn no tie but tie-dye) and, in 1987, the ice cream flavor “Cherry Garcia,” co-launched with fellow hippies Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. Though Garcia proved incapable of permanently resisting the draw of dope, he never again allowed his finances to devolve into chaos.

On his death, he left some \$10 million (admittedly, couch-cushion change by the Great Techspects of contemporary San Francisco) plus the vastly more lucrative licensing rights to his name and music to heirs who, to this day, receive a cut of every pint sold of Cherry Garcia. He also departed a San Francisco at once immeasurably richer and more left-wing than the city of his birth, or—for that matter—any city in history.

It’s impossible to imagine the Jerry Garcia of 1967—his breakout year—asking about a stock valuation. That by 1995 this was believable enough for a manufactured quip to be repeated as fact may be said to represent the confluence of hippie leftism and filthy lucre which is the distilled essence of “San Francisco Values.”

### Civic Prom Queen

THE QUOTATION MARKS ARE NOT INCIDENTAL. The phrase may—or may not—have originated as a right-wing taunt. San Francisco’s Left establishment insists it did, but also prides itself on “owning the insult,” which it has adopted as a self-congratulatory slogan—self-congratulation being more abundant in “The City” (following the stylebook of the *San Francisco Examiner*, which always capitalizes even the definite article in mid-sentence) than rainbow flags. It’s hard to imagine a town that thinks more highly of itself than contemporary San Francisco. More difficult still is to discern the basis for this self-regard.

To be sure, San Francisco Bay and its physical environs are strong evidence of nature’s beneficence and God’s goodwill. Here are the world’s very best natural harbor and one of its



finest spots for human habitation. The former is the consensus of everyone who can pilot a boat, the latter the considered judgment of, among others, Richard Henry Dana, the first American to lay eyes on the place. San Francisco, Dana saw immediately, has it all: an excellent defensive site, a situation offering commercial and military command of the Pacific coast—really the entire North American continent west of the Rockies—plus a perfect climate, lands for every kind of cultivation, flat plains and rolling hills, fresh water, natural abundance with few natural predators, and—the cherry on top—scenic beauty and dramatic vistas scarcely matched anywhere in the world.

To these, man has added many glories of his own, including the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, the cable cars, City Hall, Coit Tower, the War Memorial Opera House, plus a residential architectural style—call it *Victorio-Beaux Arts-Mediterranean*—that is both perfectly attuned to its setting and instantly recognizable by people who've seen it only in photos. If additional confirmation of Dana's assertion were needed, the prices people all over the world are willing to pay for that housing stock provide it.

To those who care about such things (and few Californians do), the history is interesting. But no more so than, say, Sacramento's, which was founded at the same time, for the same purpose, and closer to the action in the gold fields. Yet not even as an organ donor would Tony Bennett be caught dead leaving his heart in the Big Tomato.

What else has The City got going for it? To those of us raised in San Franciscophilia's humid atmosphere, the very question sounds blasphemous. But when you actually start to make a list, the uncomfortable query hangs there in the air, like an ethnic joke at a Noe Valley dinner party.

San Francisco has never been a political or economic capital. The most one can say is that, for a few decades, it could and did make a plausible claim to being the commercial and cultural nerve center of the western half of the North American continent. But with the advent of mass media and long-distance telephone, San Francisco's relative importance began to decline the instant it peaked. (Let's say, for the sake of argument, in 1945, when it hosted the conference to establish the United Nations. And we all know how that turned out.)

Hanging San Francisco's status on its supposed cultural heft, as so many try to do, is more problematic still. The art scene, a self-conscious copy of New York's, is a joke. Its culinary renown is derivative of nearby towns

(“California Cuisine” was born across the Bay in Berkeley), and for at least 20 years Northern California's best restaurants have been in the suburbs and the wine country. The City by the Bay can claim one genuinely topflight asset: the second-best opera company in the United States. The rest of its cultural attractions are no better and some a good deal worse—I'm looking at you, de Young fine arts museum, with your cotton-candy collection in that gulag-chic monstrosity—than comparable institutions in second- and third-tier Eastern and Midwestern cities.

But it's the comparison to one city in particular that really reveals—and rankles. If there is one thing San Franciscans have always known in their bones it's that not merely is their city superior to Los Angeles but that the gap is so huge, any comparison is fundamentally absurd: Godzilla versus Bambi. Native San Franciscan Lewis Lapham described the collective horror in the *Examiner* newsroom when, in 1959, his bosses were sent by mistake (or taunting fate?) the galleys of a Sunday supplement piece meant for their sister paper down south. The title—“Los Angeles: The Athens of the West”—was alarming enough. Much worse was the sinking realization that the case was unassailable. Los Angeles by that time could boast Igor Stravinsky, Jascha Heifetz, Aldous Huxley, and Christopher Isherwood. Arnold Schoenberg had died there less than a decade before; George Gershwin little more than a decade before that. These luminaries had all been born elsewhere—but then they hadn't chosen to end their wanderings on a dock by the Bay, had they? San Francisco, by contrast, lost Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Ambrose Bierce almost as soon as it gained them. And what about Raymond Chandler, Nathanael West, and James M. Cain? That's still to say nothing of the genuine literary lions (William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Evelyn Waugh) who joined Hollywood's army of hacks. For the Beats, San Francisco's most famous 20th-century icons, The City was but a waystation. Only Lawrence Ferlinghetti—founder-owner of the City Lights bookstore—remained for good, and he proved more adept at selling books than at writing them. San Francisco could once claim Dashiell Hammett—no slouch—but he had long since moved to New York.

Are we then left with mere physical beauty? The civic equivalent of a vain, empty-headed prom queen? (Perhaps not coincidentally, a veteran of the Cow Hollow bar scene once described San Francisco to me as “a town full of 6s who think they're 9s.”)

But no, just as prom queens sometimes later come into their own as hostesses, volun-

teers, and philanthropists, San Francisco has found its purpose, and with it, the rationale to justify its self-love.

### The Rich Are Different

SALON FOUNDER AND CEO DAVID TALBOT, in his book *Season of the Witch* (2012)—a more sustained effort of civic self-praise than a Zenith Booster Club pamphlet penned by George Babbitt himself—defines “San Francisco Values” as “gay marriage, medical marijuana, universal health care, immigrant sanctuary, ‘living’ minimum wage, bicycle-friendly streets, stricter environmental and consumer regulations.” As short summaries go, this is not a bad sampling of the incoherent impulses underlying modern liberalism: hedonism, utopianism, suicidal altruism, triviality, overblown responses to sensible concerns—they're all there.

Or almost. Talbot's formulation leaves out—deliberately—one crucial element because it seems not merely to stand in direct contradiction to the others but actually to undermine the warm glow of compassionate sanctimony they are intended to cast. And besides, talking about money is a little vulgar.

As should be obvious to everyone by now, in America (and in the developed world more generally), the very rich are different from you and me. They're far more left-wing.

This appears to be a new phenomenon in history. The rich being—as Aristotle noted 2,500 years ago—everywhere few in contrast to the many poor, they are always in need of some rationale to justify their privilege. In ancient times, the argument was superior virtue, above all wisdom; in the Middle Ages, a willingness to fight and die to protect vulnerable peasants; during and after the Industrial Revolution, rising living standards for all. None of these (to say nothing of others) holds much truck any more. Yet wealth endures and must assert a fresh claim—which it has found in an improbable alliance with the Left. Even more improbable are the terms.

Contemporary liberalism exists to redistribute wealth, which in turn has, historically, sought to fend off, mock, and discredit liberalism. In the rare cases when these tactics fail, wealth makes the minimum necessary concessions to ensure its own survival against the Left's relentless envy and resentment.

But for a decade or two now, the rich haven't needed to make much of an effort because they've managed to beguile liberals in much the same way that Tom Sawyer tricked his friends into whitewashing the fence. Rather than clamoring to redistribute wealth, liberal-



ism now gratefully accepts whatever crumbs wealth deigns to bestow—and in return treats wealth with the obsequious deference of a court eunuch.

How this happened—and especially its San Francisco pedigree—I hope to explain. It’s long been a truism that California is the political and cultural bellwether for the nation. But this particular export remains underappreciated.

For the moment, though, it’s enough to recognize that both the rich and the Left—and above all the rich Left—have a clear interest in obscuring and even denying their arrangement: the Left because they need the culture’s rhetorical guns trained rightward in order to maintain their grip on power; the rich to deflect scrutiny and envy from themselves. Politicians decline to stoke populist outrage against this partnership because the rich pay them not to and because, in a democracy, they must court the Left for reasons not dissimilar to Willie Sutton’s rationale for robbing banks. Sutton, though, couldn’t count bankers as backers or allies. Today’s Democratic Party, by contrast, enjoys near universal support not just from Wall Street but from the 1% in every industry, save Big Oil and Big Pharma.

The former abandoned Market Street when Chevron—a successor company to John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil—decamped for Contra Costa County in 2001 (and continues to send jobs to Houston). The latter never had any presence at all. Finance, law, technology, and media (especially social media), however, dominate the scene more completely than the Harvey Milk Club controls the San Francisco Democratic Party. They didn’t invent San Francisco Values, but they’ve effectively bought off those who did, who have proven to be surprisingly cheap dates.

### Baghdad by the Bay

**I**N HIS PLUTARCHIAN BIOGRAPHIES OF THE American Founders, Richard Brookhiser observes that while certain American settlements arose from lofty aspirations—the Puritanism of Boston, the Quakerism of Philadelphia (whose very name underscores its ambition), the religious tolerance of Maryland and Rhode Island—New York “has always been the city of getting, spending, and getting ahead.”

No words could better describe the origin and first purpose of San Francisco once the Americans got hold of it. Despite being, physically, the world’s best place to live, as recently as 1840 no one lived there. Six years later, when huckster-visionary Sam Brannan

led 240 Mormons around Cape Horn to Yerba Buena (the original settlement, at a small cove long ago erased by landfill), he instantly tripled its population. Within three years it would increase another 50-fold, driven almost entirely by gold fever. That specific passion had to give way, as the gold ran out, to silver, copper, and other get-rich-quick dreams. But the underlying thirst was never slaked, and fueled San Francisco’s spectacular growth over the next half-century.

In hindsight, it’s clear that this was the first of four epochs in the history of San Francisco (so far). What bon vivant Lucius Beebe called “San Francisco’s Golden Era” set the tone, as founding eras always do, for what came after. Wealth dug out of the Mother Lode—a 120-mile stretch of Sierra foothills due east—poured down the American and Sacramento Rivers, through the Delta, into the Bay, and finally onto San Francisco’s streets, where ostentation was the rule. Monumental Victorian façades sprouted like California poppies up and down San Francisco’s “Seven Hills” (a list later expanded, appropriately, to 49), the most spectacular atop the one called “Nob,”

### The very rich are different from you and me. They’re far more left-wing.

after “nabob,” an Anglo-Indian term for rich (and possibly criminal) adventurer. Of these, only one—that of silver magnate James Clair Flood (now the Pacific Union Club)—survived the earthquake and fire of 1906. Inside, solid gold table settings—not just the flatware, but the plates, cups, platters and serving dishes, candlesticks, even the napkin rings—were *de rigueur*. Silver may have been acceptable as the foundation of Flood’s fortune, but for his family’s accoutrement, it was far too common (and cheap) to make the necessary statement.

The second epoch arose on the rubble of 1906. Architects Willis Polk, Julia Morgan, Bernard Maybeck, William Wurster, and others less notable replaced row after row of razed or charred Victorians east of Van Ness Avenue with elegant homes and bold new monuments, while to the west—centered along the ridgeline topped by Broadway—they filled the hitherto largely undeveloped Pacific Heights with even more capacious mansions. Daniel Burnham’s ambitious plan—delivered to City Hall on April 17, 1906, the day before the Great Quake—to remake the city into the “Paris of the West,” with Haussmannian boulevards blasting their way through the

extant graph-paper-perfect street grid, wasn’t implemented. Instead San Francisco was rebuilt as an outpost of the urban Northeast, replete with a Progressive Republican upper class, an Irish police force, an Italian fishing fleet, a seedy waterfront, a radical longshoreman’s union, and a compact downtown of banks, law firms, publishing houses, and advertising agencies.

1967’s Summer of Love is the obvious point from which to date the beginning of San Francisco’s third era. Yet the cultural winds that swirled into a hurricane that year had already been blowing for at least two decades. From the beginning, the city’s upper class has been at least half Catholic—an unusual distinction shared among American cities only by Baltimore and New Orleans—and, since the earthquake, both capital and lower-case progressive. Unlike the Protestant Midwestern bluenoses who once ran Los Angeles, San Francisco’s grandees have long winked at vice. In the mining era, this tolerance was just good business. Depravity—liquor, opium, gambling, whores, you name it—was the city’s third principal industry, after banking and dry goods. Decades of looking the other way from, and even encouraging, certain behaviors will have an effect, not least making it difficult to rise up and say “No more!” when the limits of one’s personal tolerance are finally, inevitably exceeded.

Booze always flowed freely, even—especially—during Prohibition, when the mayor himself, “Sunny Jim” Rolph, personally donated several horse-cartloads of the finest Kentucky bourbon to ensure the smooth proceeding of the 1920 Democratic Convention. And thus, H.L. Mencken wrote,

was Rolph reelected almost unanimously and remained in office until 1931, when he was promoted by the appreciative people of all California to the highest place within their gift, and there he remained, to the satisfaction of the whole human race, until his lamented death in 1934.

After repeal, the Protestants in the state’s southern half tried to keep Prohibition’s spirit alive with various blue laws, but San Francisco hadn’t bothered to enforce the 18th Amendment when it was the supreme law of the land. Once it was gone, Bayshore saloonkeepers pulled up their shades and never looked back.

World War II provided the greatest material boon to California since the Gold Rush—greater even than the oil boom that surged Los Angeles’s population past San Francisco’s in 1920. The war brought money and people, who came to build ships and munitions, or



else to transit through on their way to fight the war itself. Before embarking, well-paid soldiers, sailors, and Marines would of course spend freely in bars and bawdy houses—and then remember those rolling good times in the mud and blood of hell-hole islands such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Okinawa, vowing that if they managed to survive, they'd be damned if they were going all the way back home to the blizzards of Buffalo or the monsoons of Mobile. Hell, no—they were going to get off the boat and stay in California, where the good life was being lived.

“In-migrants” no less than immigrants are by definition self-selecting, and California selected those who were never too happy back home in the first place, even if they didn't realize it until they saw an alternative. San Francisco wasn't that wild then, not yet, just a little more blasé than the rest of the country about low-level vice, even the exotic kinds like reefer, unknown or at least unacknowledged in the hinterlands. Some of the newcomers came specifically in search of laxity. Others just liked the look and feel of the place but soon found themselves influenced by their neighbors' revelry, and so, in a self-reinforcing cycle, the city's morals progressively loosened. This is the town—the open, easy-going, mid-century pleasure ground—that columnist Herb Caen celebrated as “Baghdad by the Bay.”

In 1957, the white-glove establishment joined with the Irish-Italian police force and Irish district attorney's office to mount a desultory counteroffensive against what they considered bridge-too-far cultural corrosion. They probably would have lost no matter what, but they were imprudent in their choice of opponent. History is written not so much by the winners as by the writers of history—and in this case, as in so many others, the two coincided. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*—sold to two undercover juvie cops by one of Ferlinghetti's unsuspecting clerks at City Lights—may not have been great literature (adolescent dreck, if you ask me), but one must go back to republican Rome to find a time when censors weren't reflexively condemned as puritanical fanatics. Despite the narrowness of the loss—a single judge decided the *Howl* obscenity trial—the establishment's self-confidence was shattered. They never stood up for themselves, or against anything, again.

That their initial fear contained at least a grain of truth may be deduced from the fact that the intersection where City Lights still stands—Broadway and Columbus—became America's first unabashed and uncloaked red light district and the birthplace of the modern porn industry. In those days—the 1950s through the '70s, when William Parker and

then Edward Davis served as Los Angeles's police chief—the LAPD maintained a vigilant and energetic vice squad that quickly busted anyone caught working on dirty movies. The SFPD didn't care, so nearly all the porn made before L.A. gave up in the early '80s was shot up north, where not coincidentally a lot of the “talent” was dancing in Broadway strip joints.

The hippies thus intuited that, in 1967, going to San Francisco, flowers in your hair, was to push on an open, or at least unlocked, door.

### Buy Low, Sell Never

IT HELPED THAT IT WAS CHEAP. INSANELY cheap. Western San Joaquin Valley dirt-farm cheap. This fact has become underappreciated to a point beyond mere forgetfulness but is hard to overemphasize. San Francisco through the third quarter of the 20th century (at least) was a textbook example of a vastly underpriced asset. The office towers, retail spaces, and especially that housing stock—all built for a city of far greater cultural and economic significance—stagnated or even fell in value as that significance declined. But the views, weather, amenities, and quality of life stayed the same or even improved. Hence gettings were good, if you had any reason to get. Conversely, heartbreak would stalk those who got out too soon, either because they didn't see the future coming or just had other things to do.

Everyone has a story. A friend tells of his native-Angelino father moving to New York in 1948 and succeeding well enough to afford, by the '60s, a comfortable but otherwise average house in Scarsdale. When he returned west in 1968, he was able to trade that house for a four-story Edwardian with an elevator and bridge-to-bridge views on Vallejo Street, one block downhill (but the good, north side of the hill) from Broadway—plus cash. That is, the owner of the PacHeights mansion threw in the cash as part of his end of the deal.

My father's first job out of law school was working for Melvin “King of Torts” Belli, who lived until his fifth divorce at 2950 Broadway, probably San Francisco's most opulent residence, which he bought in 1978 for \$438,000. Two years ago, it sold for \$35 million, an appreciation more than 2,000% above inflation and outstripping the S&P 500 returns almost two-to-one over the same period.

We never had a shot at Outer Broadway—though as a child I was fortunate enough to visit the boss's house and swim in San Francisco's only heated outdoor pool. We did, however, after two years in the purgatory of Burlingame, briefly secure a narrow, marijuana-green Victorian on Russian Hill—the bad part, with views only of North Beach strip club neon, but

Russian Hill nonetheless. Alas, my father fell out with Belli (and with the rest of the San Francisco bar) and sold that house in 1980 for \$24 worth of beads and beaver skins, or so I imagine when I think about it today, which I try not to do. In this he was but the last in a long string of my forebears—who had first arrived in The City in 1888—to decamp before reaping the benefits of the late 20th century (and still accelerating) real-estate Gold Rush. My Aunt Ida—the only one of us with any sense, apparently—bought an elegant Marina Mediterranean in the 1930s, where she lived until her death at age 96 in 1992.

In any case, just imagine what it was like for the hippies. Entire Victorians in the Haight could be had for four figures—to buy, not rent. Granted, some looked as though they might collapse in a stiff breeze, and the plumbing often made Gold Rush outhouses seem modern, but hippies aren't ones to complain about sanitary conditions, and the wind rarely gets above a zephyr east of Mount Sutro.

### Nerds No More

BECAUSE TECH SUPPLIES A VITAL INGREDIENT to the San Francisco Val-ues recipe, it's tempting to date the beginning of the city's fourth—and present—epoch from the Netscape IPO. Still, my vote goes to the day in April 1987 when the *Chronicle* announced, front page above the fold, that San Francisco's median home price had exceeded New York's to become the highest in the nation. This seemed incredible at the time, what with the Wall Street boom. More incredible still, Santa Cruz—the scruffy little beach town 75 miles south to which my family had long since migrated—came in at number three. As far I could tell, nobody but the ticket takers at the Boardwalk even earned an income in Santa Cruz, and then only in summer. How could it possibly be the third least affordable housing market in the nation?

In hindsight, it's clear that this was the moment when the trickle of tech money flowing north to The City and south to the beach—buying up all those (formerly) underpriced assets—surged to a flood. A few old-timers still resent these flows, but most now accept them as part of the natural order. Yet back when it all started—when Peninsula suburbs were still largely bedroom communities for Financial District middle management, when it didn't take Apple options to buy a cookie-cutter postwar two-bedroom in Sunnyvale, when the tech industry had almost nothing to do with San Francisco (and vice versa)—the shift was quite unexpected.



But it shouldn't have been surprising that the techies would fall hard for views and pretty Victorians. With a few exceptions, such as Old Palo Alto, their Valley's architecture is surprisingly drab, especially by the standards of what Charles Murray has termed the "superzips." Even less surprising is that they fell for the "lifestyle." Techies may be professionally adventuresome, but their personal lives tend toward the square. Lacking imagination for how to spend their windfalls, these most modern of men turned to that most modern solution: they hired experts. Hippies, foodies, yogis—the whole menagerie of counterculture free spirits who could never get past H.R. at any going tech concern—were suddenly in demand as lifestyle gurus.

Or if you wish, you may compare the techies and their wealth to a groom, and The City with its graceful homes, gracious living, and groovy inhabitants to a beautiful bride. It would not be the first time—not even in San Francisco—that unpolished new money has sought to boost its status by an alliance with (relatively) impecunious sophistication. Hence our prom queen at last found her prince, who in addition to paying her way has given her new life.

In one sense, nothing has changed. San Francisco is as overrated and overestimated

as ever. Nearly all the big tech innovations and fortunes were made well outside the city limits. Only recently have the more hipsterish firms such as Twitter and Dropbox chosen S.F. headquarters, partly out of derision for the Valley as middle-aged and passé, and partly to be nearer to the urban delights, like yuppies eager to pay top dollar once the gentrifying gays and artsy white liberals have completed the hard and risky pioneering.

But in a deeper sense, everything is different. Only Washington now outstrips San Francisco as a company town, whose civic, cultural, economic, political, and social life is more dominated by a single industry than New York is by finance. The diversity of the old mini-Manhattan is lost—and unlamented because the upside is so massive.

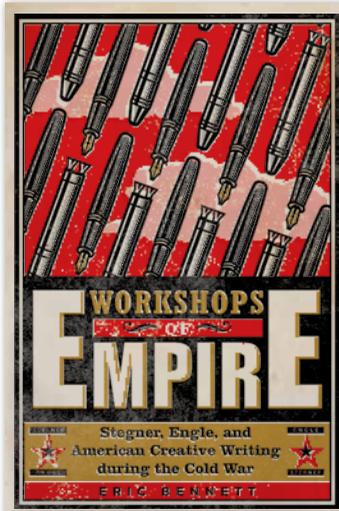
San Francisco is now America's Second City, having seized the title more swiftly and humiliatingly than when Los Angeles 50 years ago eclipsed Chicago. At least the latter two were (and still are) comparable in size, with L.A. claiming obvious advantages over its freezing, windswept, blue-collar Midwestern rival in climate, dynamism, and quality of life. By contrast, in both population and area, S.F. is a mere fraction of L.A. and its weather arguably worse. That unparalleled natural harbor? The manmade one down south has

blown past it in terms of traffic and strategic significance while the Port of San Francisco today is hardly more than a tourist trap. Fog City never had more than a speck of a media sector; its minor publishing firms were long ago acquired (for peanuts) by the big houses in New York. Yet—the cruelest cut—San Francisco now manages to out-produce L.A.'s principal export crop: glamour. If the 1996 film *Independence Day* were remade today, the Transamerica Pyramid would replace downtown L.A.'s Library Tower as the West Coast's object of alien wrath.

"Glamour" may seem to tech nerds as "bad skin" is to supermodels, but it correlates highly with money, which the nerds have in spades. More to the point, they really aren't nerds any more. To the contrary, they are now the soul of hip. First and foremost because the whole world, and elites especially, adore and are addicted to their products, from Facebook to the iPhone, which have redefined what hip means. But even superficially, the change is palpable. Pocket protectors and tape around the nose bridge are long gone. If a techie even wears glasses—most choose contacts or get Lasik—he insists on the latest style from Veo Optics, and if the bridge breaks, he buys a new pair. Tom Wolfe pointed out 15 years ago how Silicon Valley forced dress codes to relax (cra-

## Workshops of Empire

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by Eric Bennett

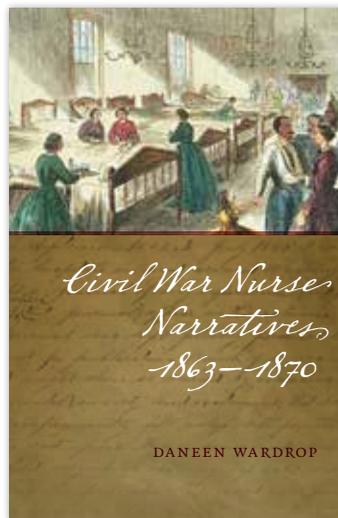


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ter?) throughout elite America. “The billionaire founders of the new wonder corporations walked in the door looking like well pressed, well barbered beachcombers, but beachcombers all the same.” A necktie at Woodside’s Village Pub is the sure sign of a dork—or worse, an investor from the East.

This hipness extends well beyond mere dress to all forms of lifestyle. The residual nerd stench that money failed to rinse away, the nerds scrubbed off by allying themselves with, and adopting the tastes and habits of, the hippies.

How this manifests itself in everyday life David Brooks explained in hilarious detail in *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), a minor classic that is, if anything, underrated and superior to 99% of academic social science. In modern San Francisco, the specifics differ slightly, but that’s not so important. More germane to our purpose are the intellectual roots and architecture of the alliance.

### Opinion Morality

**T**HE MARRIAGE OF OLD-TIME MATERIALISM and hippie “morality” may seem improbable. But try to think like a Hegelian. Thesis and antithesis met, were repelled at first sight, then after years of sexually

tense mating dance, fell in love and conceived the inevitable synthesis.

Inevitable, because it takes a rare discipline in the human soul to despise or disdain money, and a Herculean effort to maintain that pose for long. Rare is the genuine Socrates or Trappist monk or even committed hippie willing to live indefinitely on the bare metal floor of his 1970 VW Bus. Reconciliation was bound to happen. Only the terms were in question.

It took a couple of decades for the outlines of a solution to emerge. One should not look for Hegelian precision in the result, which is a mish-mash of conflicting impulses, contradictory ideas, and incompatible desires. An old joke about French intellectuals ends: “That may be fine in practice, but will it work in theory?”

The answer in this case is, no: the theory is a mess, as can be seen first of all from the fundamental contradiction underlying the phrase “San Francisco Values.” On the one hand, San Francisco Values are celebrated as intrinsically good, the enlightened mores and policies that define justice in the modern world. On the other hand, the very word “values” betrays the concept’s origin in late modern philosophy, which denies any objective basis for the good and insists that all values are merely preferences.

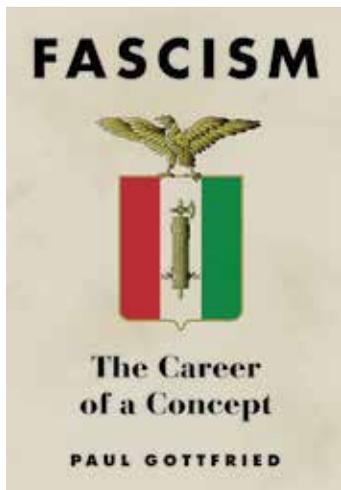
San Franciscans do their best to hew to both ideas simultaneously. In one of History’s little pranks, the Republican convention that nominated Barry Goldwater was held in San Francisco, albeit in prelapsarian 1964. The Goldwater slogan, “In your heart, you know he’s right,” was a concession to the unspeakability of his message in polite society. San Franciscans, by contrast, never tire of lecturing the world on the rightness of their every thought. “Opinion morality”—I profess, therefore I am good—did not originate in, nor is it unique to, their city. But there it flowered and reached its fullest perfection. In 2006, the cartoon *South Park* memorialized this attitude with an episode entitled “Smug Alert!”—in which a family moves to San Francisco to escape flyover provincialism and find happiness among the self-anointed.

Yet as good postmoderns, our S.F. elites are uneasy with the concept of eternal, objective truth, which they assume inevitably leads to Babbitry, absolutism, slavery, fascism, the Inquisition, and other dreadful things people flee red states to get away from.

Their solution to this paradox is not to think about it. Despite pretenses to the contrary, the town is not particularly reflective or intellectual but rather living proof that self-absorption and introspection share no necessary connec-

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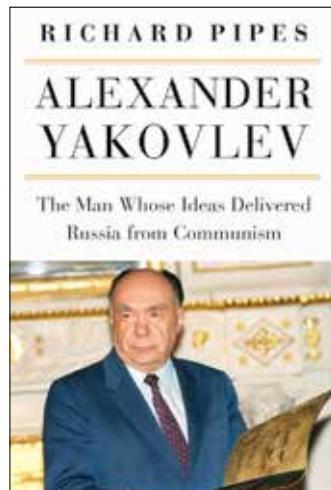
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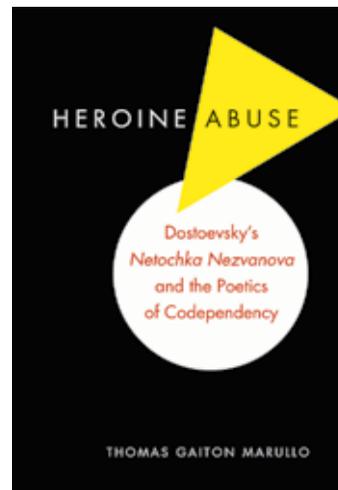
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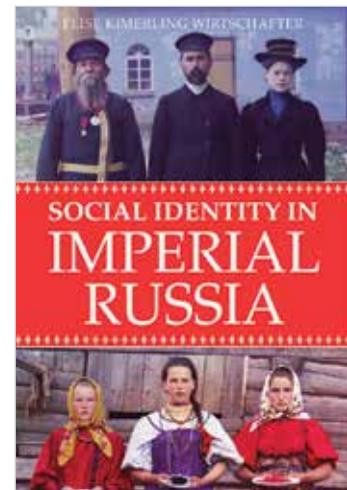
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tion. The two main universities sit well outside the city limits and long ago gave themselves over almost wholly to worldly pursuits. Like all elite schools, they're more alike than they are different, but the differences capture the yin and yang of San Francisco Values—Berkeley exemplifying the priggish, scolding, left-wing fanaticism; and Stanford the hyper-ambitious, status-seeking, white-hot money lust more scorching than any found on Wall Street.

This might seem a difficult circle to square, but, like the early Christians, San Franciscans manage to turn a weakness into a strength. The very theoretical incoherence of their worldview allows to them to incorporate into it whatever they want. The dictionary definition, no less than the philosophic underpinnings, of “values” points the way: “San Francisco Values” are in the final analysis just the things that San Franciscans value. They've valued money from the beginning. But only recently did they find a way to give this ancient desire a hip, high-minded spin.

### Money Laundering

**T**HE CENTRAL PURPOSE OF SAN FRANCISCO Values is, then, to justify, obfuscate, glamorize, exalt, and deflect attention from House of Bourbon levels of wealth concentration and inequality. More important, it is to transform money into something not merely desirable for oneself—which it has always and everywhere been—and not even admirable when lawfully and honorably earned by others (America's great contribution to mammon-worship), but as the foundation of a “just” social hierarchy based on a left-wing conception of virtue. So long as it could all be blessed, however gratuitously, in the name of the “least advantaged,” both parties to the original culture clash had reason to seek this easy-going Rawlsian resolution: the rich because wealth, to protect itself from envy, has always needed legitimacy—whether genuine or a veneer doesn't matter, so long as people profess to believe—while the hippies inevitably tired or aged out of their romantic attachment to poverty.

The issue of this marriage is today's high-flown lifestyle liberalism, which operates on at least three levels. The first is the elevation of the aforementioned “opinion morality” to a status superior to, and almost a replacement for, the personal virtues that were once thought to constitute genuine ethics. This is a sop to the lefties, who 50 years ago determined what the content of the new morality would be and still serve as the high priests who alone are entitled to define its parameters. More fundamentally, it's the key source

of the oligarchs' legitimacy. Everyone knows who the bad people with money are: the Roosevelts' monocled “malefactors of great wealth,” or Rich Uncle Pennybags, the Monopoly mascot who forecloses on widows and donates to Republicans (but never to charity, much less Amnesty International). The modern tech billionaire who crusades for transgender rights and frets about potable water in the Third World, simply by professing these and other passions, is admired as an upstanding person who deserves his wealth and status.

Second, and related, is the public celebration and sanctification of (formerly) morally neutral behaviors and tastes. One can now tell the right sort of person in part based on what she eats, where she shops, how her apartment is furnished, whether her coffee is fair trade and her seafood sustainably fished, and so on. It is not just that her preferences are more expensive than the more mundane alternatives (though of course they are, and that helps). More important, these preferences are now signifiers of moral and personal worth. They are also a way for the oligarchs to forge and

### Yesterday's kooks are today's mayors, supervisors, and state senators.

maintain a bond with the lefty rank-and-file who, on the surface, might seem to have divergent interests. These common tastes—especially ones the foot soldiers can't really afford—dampen feelings of palpable inferiority, which the oligarchs further assuage by inviting the lefties to some of their parties, where the goods can be sampled gratis. “[T]oday intellectuals know their Château Margaux from their Merlot,” Brooks writes, a bit fuzzy on the blend comprising fine Bordeaux but right on the money with his larger point. Pouring a little Margaux (or Lafite, or Latour—but save the La Tâche for when it's just us) now and then alongside the organic elk carpaccio helps to maintain a sense of “us,” however improbable—sort of the way antebellum plantation owners mollified poor white trash with the reminder that “At least you're not a”...you know.

Third, then, is the implicit deal between the oligarchs and the rank-and-file. The latter not only decline to use their considerable propaganda skills to vilify the former, but cheerfully glorify and whitewash them. The oligarchs in turn subsidize the lefties through non-profits and make-work jobs (categories emphatically

not mutually exclusive) and, more important, take their cues from them on matters of politics not directly contrary to their economic interests. It's a kind of socio-intellectual money laundering. Call it—with a tip of the cap to Booker T. Washington—the San Francisco Compromise.

Since the 1970s at least, conservatives and Republicans have dreamed of co-opting the tech industry—as donors above all, but also as allies and friends whose borrowed imprimatur might rub off and supply a little cool-by-association. They're everything we exalt! Entrepreneurial! Meritocratic! Achievers! Committed to excellence!

Alas, this alliance has always been a pipe dream, and one that recedes further from reach with every IPO. The techies—ever besotted with “creative destruction” and their self-congratulatory update, “disruptive innovation”—never had much use for conservatism in any form. The default Republican appeal falls with a thud. Techies and their bankers are more than rich enough to pay, while suffering no diminution of lifestyle, whatever level of taxation California and the feds see fit to extort. Which in part helps explain—or would, if conservative economists weren't so dense—why high tax, high cost of living zones like San Francisco and Manhattan not only don't collapse from the strain but seem to leap from triumph to triumph. If you had the money to live anywhere, where would you go? Seacliff? Or Sandusky?

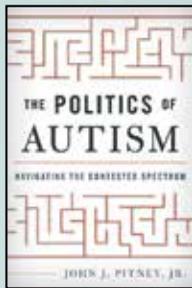
Although techies practice “family values” with near-religious fervor, they ridicule any politics based on them. A nerd lucky enough to become accepted as cool develops an unconscious reflex to abhor any unhip thought the way the body automatically rejects an organ of the wrong blood type. Besides, an integral part of the Compromise is complete submission to the Left on cultural matters.

### Kook Capital

**N**OT THAT IT'S ALL GONE SMOOTHLY. Appropriately for California, fault lines remain. There is, for instance, friction between the old and new upper classes. As vastly greater tech fortunes push prices ever upward, old San Francisco dynasties—Spreckels sugar, Levi Strauss denim, and the like—must now strain to keep their charitable commitments while maintaining ducal magnificence on Outer Broadway. One imperative is to persuade the new money to donate to old causes. But the techies have proved much less willing than Gilded Age robber barons to defer to their supposed betters on how to spend it. They're happy to take on socialites

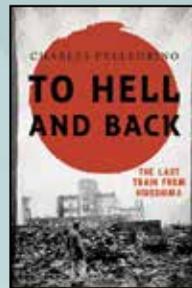
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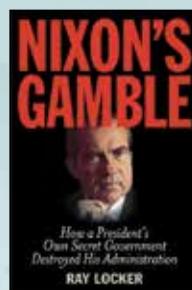
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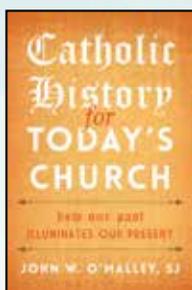
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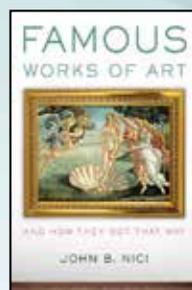
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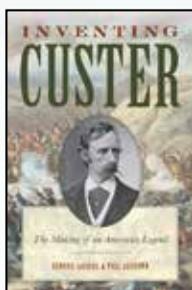
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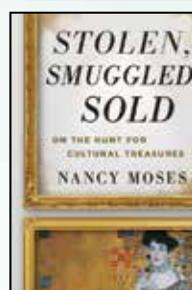
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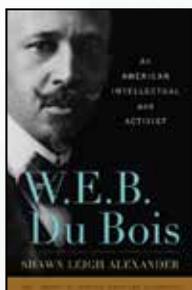
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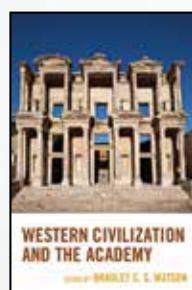
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as paramours, but they've already exchanged rings with the lefties, and mistresses have much less say than wives over how household income is spent. Hence favored institutions such as the de Young and the Opera go begging, while tech money tries to bring broadband to the Amazon and entrepreneurialism to Outer Mongolia. Pacific Heights isn't exactly thrilled about this, but at least they've done better than the hapless conservatives at co-opting their new overlords.

The San Andreas, though, is the gap between the bourgeois stolidity necessary to keep the money flowing and the Left's insatiable appetite for permanent revolution. Every fresh enthusiasm instantly becomes the defining struggle for justice against oppression not only of its time but of all time—especially if, just yesterday, nobody had even heard of it.

This can make the upper classes—old and new alike—uneasy. It's one thing to disruptively innovate yourself into a billionaire and to creatively destroy your competition. That's natural and laudable. But too much disruptive destruction can put all that wealth, plus the orderly environment in which it can be best enjoyed, at risk. The lefties don't understand this, or don't care, or in some cases even look forward to conflagration, which is why they must be managed like unruly children.

But this is not so easy to accomplish. Former mayor and lifelong San Franciscan Dianne Feinstein, sounding like a lady who protests too much, once famously disclaimed the title "kook capital of the world" for her native city. And indeed San Francisco does today seem, outwardly at least, less kooky than it was in the kook heyday of the Reverend Jim Jones, the Zebra murders, Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, and the rest of that memorable cast of characters so vividly chronicled in *Season of the Witch*. The fact that the center of gravity of the world's most prestigious and profitable industry continues to inch north toward the city-county line also provides a veneer of seriousness lacking a generation ago.

Yet while The City may look more sedate, in another sense it is kookier than ever. Fringe ideas from back then—and many then undreamt of—are now policy. Yesterday's kooks are today's mayors, supervisors, and state senators—their kookiness having not faded away but become mainstream. There is no formal or even informal opposition any more. The cultural and intellectual atmosphere is one of

stultifying groupthink coupled with increasingly swift persecution of dissent. There are no gulags (yet), but to remain employed—and employable—without publicly professing allegiance to the latest dogma is all but impossible. More than 18 months after being forced from the company he helped to found, for the sin of having donated—six years prior—to a ballot initiative defending marriage that passed with bipartisan and transracial support, Brendan Eich still doesn't have a job.

Old-line aristocrats and other strangers in this strange land must accommodate themselves to the leftward march even as they struggle to maintain the strategy Friedrich Nietzsche ascribed to beleaguered conservatives: change only "according to the principle 'as slowly as possible.'"

Feinstein—the West Coast's Daniel Patrick Moynihan—illustrates the point. At first glance, the comparison seems inapt. She was born to wealth; he grew up in a Hell's Kitchen saloon. He authored 16 books; she is no one's idea of an intellectual. Yet they share a reflexive conservatism, though Moynihan's was the product of study and experience while Feinstein's is in her blood. But both quickly sensed that to stay in the ever-changing game, they had to adapt to the new rules. Hence the quotably conservative Moynihan—"defining deviancy down," etc.—was a reliable vote for the Left his whole senatorial career. So is the prim, matronly, sensible, and "pro-business" DiFi. The senior senator from California may go home to the splendor of Pacific Heights, far from the grimy ground zero of progressive activism in the Mission. But denizens of the latter have veto power over what she thinks and how she votes.

Meanwhile, down in the Mission, the plush (and free) buses that Google and other Valley companies line up along Dolores Street to transport gentrifiers south to their jobs are vandalized and blocked by a lefty old guard increasingly priced out of their accustomed haunts. This is but one way that the principal fault line shakes, rattles, and roils the San Francisco Compromise. Another is that the techies are loyal to nothing and no one but themselves and their own messianic ambitions to remake the world into a playground for *Übermenschen*, unconstrained not only by quaint, outmoded notions like tradition, religion, and nature but also by any cause the Left holds dear. The instant some techie dream bumps up against a lefty piety, the for-

mer will drop the latter more quickly than a bored housewife dumps her safe, dependable (but bald, fat, and unambitious) husband. It's bound to happen sooner rather than later, and when it does, the Left will be just as stunned and despondent as hubby.

How long before The Big One?

### The Davos Archipelago

“ANYTHING THAT CAN'T GO ON FOREVER, won't.” It's not yet clear if the San Francisco Compromise is one such thing. It may seem surprising that it was forged at all, much less that it has lasted this long. But who's to say, in this time of continuous (and mostly bloodless) revolution, that a new, durable, and enduring order is not emerging?

For all its original contributions to the way we live now, San Francisco is far from unique. Better to think of it as one of the principal islands in the Davos Archipelago—that chain of cities, suburbs, university towns, resorts, and nature preserves that connect and unify the transnational elite. San Francisco, if not quite first among equals, resides somewhere above the second tier. There are, after all, no New York or London Values *eo nomine*. New Yorkers, Londoners, and so many others live by San Francisco Values (and consequently must pay San Francisco prices for the privilege). Perhaps San Francisco did not legislate every section and line of the new code all on its own. But it was the first to put it all together into a whole, and proselytize it nationally and then globally. The rest of the world may lag a little at the margins but will catch up in short order. If you doubt this, and if you live anywhere within an hour's drive of the Davos Archipelago, ask yourself what would happen if you referred aloud to Caitlyn Jenner as “Bruce.”

We may not all be San Franciscans now, but everyone in the professional classes and above feels the gravitational pull of San Francisco Values and must (at least in public) either pay their respects or decline to demur. The little gold-counting, mining-pan trading post of Yerba Buena has finally become what it for so long yearned to be: the socio-cultural arbiter not just of half the world, but the better half.

*Michael Anton, a native of Northern California, is a writer living in New York.*

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