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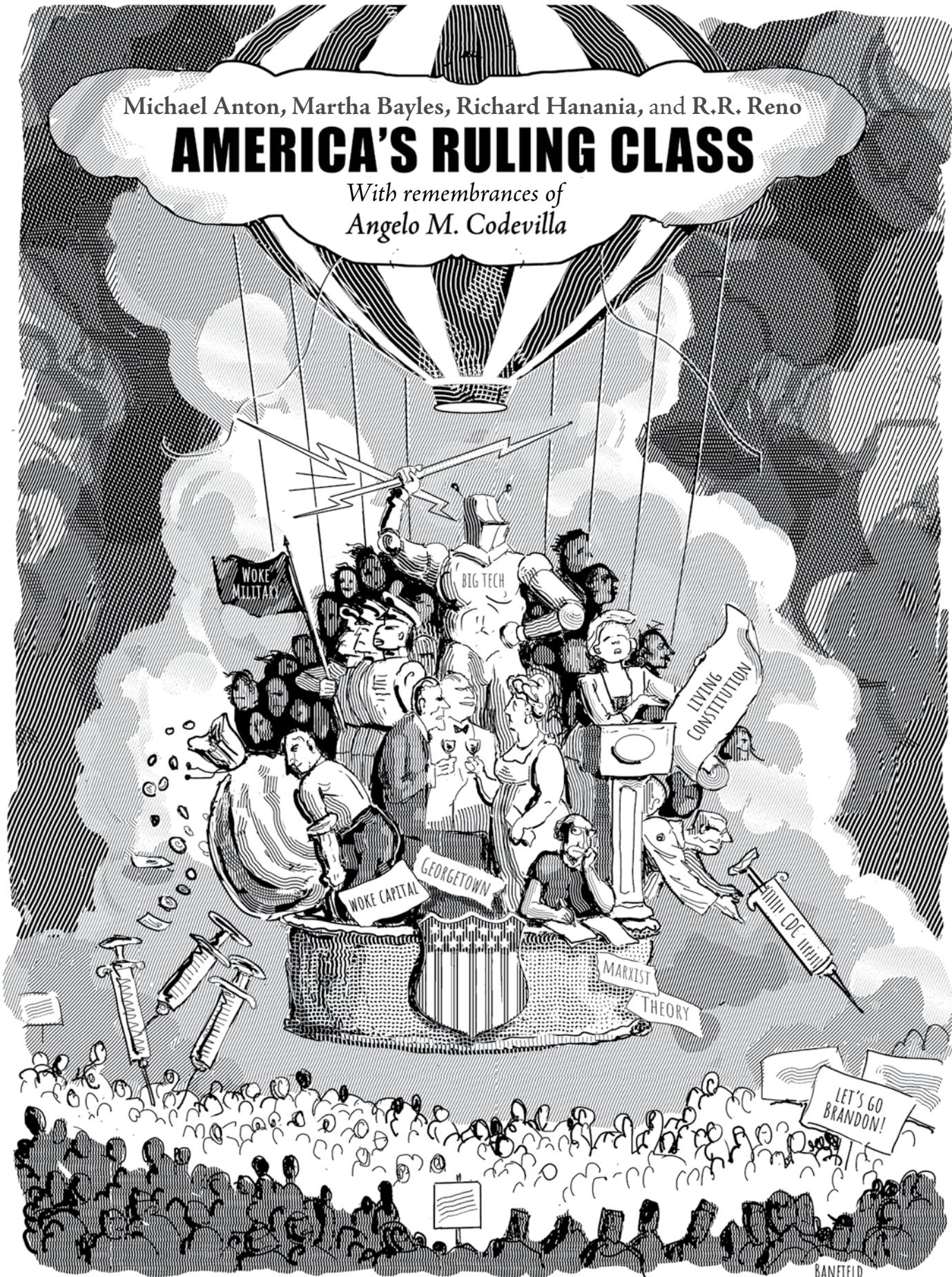
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vs. Big Tech**

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Cannato
♦
Myron
Magnet:
**Autumn in
New York**

Gary Saul
Morson:
**The
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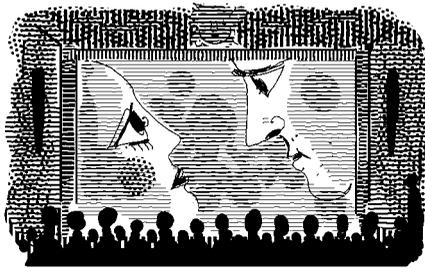
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Dare We Joke About the Woke?

Laughter is a human thing, a virtue belonging only to humanity and God, that perhaps God gave to humans as consolation for having made them intelligent.

—Marcel Pagnol

THE FIRST FILMMAKER ELECTED TO THE Académie française, Marcel Pagnol was one of the greatest comic directors who ever lived. So this comment deserves our attention, as does its likely source, the French philosopher Henri Bergson. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), Bergson defined laughter as distinctively human (he did not mention God), necessarily social (we rarely laugh alone), and most important, *cognitive*. “The comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart,” Bergson argued, in contradiction to the prevailing nineteenth-century view of laughter as an emotional reflex. “Its appeal is to the intelligence, pure and simple.”

These philosophical ruminations may seem removed from the subject at hand: a new Netflix series called *The Chair*. But rest assured, they are related. Co-created by Amanda Peet, a 40-ish Hollywood actress, and Annie Julia Wyman, a 30-ish Ivy Leaguer, this six-part series purports to be a satirical comedy about a struggling English department in a fictional small college called Pembroke, located somewhere in deep-blue Massachusetts. According to the press reports, the project was greenlit by Netflix because, although Peet is not known for her comedic roles, Wyman has a Ph.D. in the subject. I’m not kidding. Along with bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Stanford, Wyman has a doctorate in literature from Harvard, where her dissertation was titled “The Comic Sphere.”

Having a Ph.D. has never made anyone funny, but neither does it make Wyman un-

funny. For all I know, she has a terrific sense of humor. It just isn’t evident in her dissertation, which is full of strained wordplay sagging under the weight of academic jargon. Nor is it evident in *The Chair*, at least in my opinion. In this I differ from other reviewers across the political spectrum, whose funny bones were apparently set a-thrumming.

Discussed in this essay:

The Chair, created by Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman.
Netflix

Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, by Henri Bergson,
translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. Andesite Press,
214 pages, \$24.95 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper)

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody, by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay. Pitchstone Publishing,
352 pages, \$27.95 (cloth), \$17.99 (paper)

Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience, by Peter L. Berger. De Gruyter,
232 pages, \$42 (paper)

Time praised the series as a “sharp satire” about “the politicized powder keg of higher ed,” *New York Magazine* extolled it as a “satire of old-school thinking and academic inertia,” the *Wall Street Journal* found it “full of charm, and a captivating humor,” and *Reason* judged it an “uproarious but terrifying campus comedy.”

Why did my funny bone not thrum? A colleague at my university suggests an inverse relationship between how much people laugh at *The Chair* and how much they understand about the fate of literary study over the past half-century. Of all the burnt-over districts in academia, literature is the crispiest. The conflagration began in the 1960s, when critical theory, that dour hybrid of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, copulated with the equally dour structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure to engender two impish offspring: deconstruction and postmodernism, which proceeded to spend the next two decades setting fire not just to literature and the humanities, but to the foundations of Western civilization.

In their illuminating book, *Cynical Theories*, the recovering postmodernists James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose explain how these impish offspring lost favor in the 1980s, when a new generation realized that their “endless dismantling and disruption” was “fated to consume everything interesting and thus render itself *boring*” (emphasis in the original). Unfortunately, that realization did not inspire a return to the older view of literature as a guide to what Immanuel Kant famously called “the crooked timber of humanity.” Thanks to theory, that timber had long since been reduced to a heap of charred fragments. Lindsay and Pluckrose describe what happened next:

From the ashes arose a new set of Theorists whose mission was...to *reconstruct* a better world.... We will call this more recent development *applied postmodernism*.... In its evolved form, it spread, leaping the “species” gap from academics to activists to everyday people, as it became increasingly graspable and ac-



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tionable and therefore more contagious. It mutated around a core of Theory to form several new strains, *which are far less playful and far more certain of their (meta)narratives than their predecessors.* [Emphasis added.]

As the authors make clear, these new strains have now congealed into an ideology as intellectually simplistic, politically obdurate, and morally merciless as any that wreaked havoc in the 20th century. At the moment, this ideology goes by different names. Conservatives call it “cultural Marxism,” which sounds good but distorts its complex history. Liberals call it “political correctness,” a term invented by Western Communists to disparage the rigidities of Stalinism. Digital natives call it “cancel culture,” because of the power it wields through social media. Lindsay and Pluckrose’s “applied postmodernism” is the most accurate term, but it is highly unlikely to leap the species gap and appeal to the masses. That leaves “wokeness,” a black slang expression dating back to the blues, which is proving to be one of those pungent American coinages embraced by friend and foe, at home and around the world.

If wokeness has not yet achieved *Gleichschaltung*—the Nazi term for total control and transformation of society—it is not for lack of trying. Because this ideology was spawned in academia, it is incumbent upon those who would satirize that institution to have a fairly solid understanding of it. In the case of *The Chair*, the writer-producers Peet and Wyman had enough understanding of wokeness to include a plotline about it, but not enough to create what the reviewers called an “uproarious but terrifying comedy” about “the politicized powder keg of higher ed.”

False Notes

THE CHAIR OPENS WITH A 40-ISH KOREAN-American professor named Ji-Yoon (played by Sandra Oh) rushing across a snowy campus to the chorus of Vivaldi’s “Gloria in Excelsis Deo.” Her destination is a towering edifice in the Romanesque Revival style (in real life, the Old Main building at Washington & Jefferson College in southwest Pennsylvania) that houses the Pembroke College English department. Nervous but determined, Ji-Yoon enters a mahogany-paneled foyer and climbs an elaborately carved stairway under lead-paned windows with stained glass inserts (in real life, the Andrew W. Mellon mansion at Chatham University in Pittsburgh), and after hurrying down a hallway, stops before a mahogany door festooned

with a shiny new nameplate: Dr. Ji-Yoon Kim, Chair, Department of English.

Already this rings false, because as any academician can tell you, being made chair of your department is more like being elected fire marshal than like being promoted to the C-suite. And it almost never includes a cushy new office. But let us overlook this false note; there are plenty more where it came from.

The topic of wokeness is raised at the end of episode one, when Ji Yoon’s close friend and would-be lover, Bill (played by Jay Duplass), makes a “brilliant mistake” in his popular course, “Modernism and Death.” A charismatic bohemian type, Bill is trying to inspire a room full of students who by their own admission did not do the reading and have come to class stoned. In an effort to highlight the connection between fascism and absurdism, Bill mimics a Nazi salute. The students are alert enough to capture the salute on their smartphones, and before you can say *Gleichschaltung*, a gif (typically a six-second video clip) doctored to show Bill in a Nazi uniform has gone viral.

Over the following five episodes, Bill becomes a hero of sorts. First, he tries to reason with the students, who shout him down. This scene feels a bit forced, because while two students are given names and minor speaking parts, the rest are presented throughout the series as an improbably diverse, equal, and inclusive rainbow chorus who are solidly united behind the slogan “No Nazis at Pembroke!”

Next, Bill is pressured to write a letter of formal apology by the smarmy dean (David Morse) and the even smarmier P.R. officer (Cliff Christopher). Bill refuses, and when the P.R. guy offers to help him draft the letter, Bill snaps, “I don’t co-write.” After that, he refuses a generous package offered by the college in exchange for an admission of guilt and voluntary resignation. And finally, after being sacked, he has the gumption to hire a lawyer he cannot afford to help get his job back.

This is heartening as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. To begin with, a Nazi salute barely registers on the Geiger counter of woke radioactivity. According to a 2021 survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), fascism is not on FIRE’s list of 15 topics college students find most difficult to talk about. By making Nazism the issue, Peet and Wyman sidestep the real challenge of nailing wokeness with an intelligent satire. Instead, they play it safe with an anodyne tale about a gaggle of old white guys resisting progress in the form of two “women of color,” Ji-Yoon and her black friend and colleague, Yaz (played by Nana Mensah), who could not be more charming and reasonable.



And in case the audience is still not sure which side to root for, Peet and Wyman stack the deck by making the old white professors look ridiculous. Only one, a grumpy Herman Melville scholar named Elliott (played by Bob Balaban), has a speaking part. The others are wheeled on and off stage as pale-faced caricatures who have no reason to speak, because their frowning and grumbling are sufficient to convey their extreme discomfort with anything that might threaten their privilege. As for their accumulated scholarly and pedagogical achievements, those are lumped with all the other debilities of age—deafness, lameness, dementia, incontinence, technical incompetence—that render the old guard ripe for mockery.

The sole exception is Joan (Holland Taylor), the only woman in the white-haired cohort, whose potty-mouthed second-wave feminism affords her the privilege of dumping on the male colleagues she has worked with for 32 years. Like them, Joan is being pressured by the administration to retire, because, as the dean frequently points out, the most senior faculty are the ones with the highest salaries and the lowest enrollments. When the dean orders Joan's office moved, without notice, to the basement of the athletics building, she goes ballistic, and it takes the younger and wiser Ji-Yoon to calm her down by advising that she lodge a complaint with the campus Title IX office. Joan does so, but her demeanor suggests that she has never been to that office before and is baffled by its procedures.

This sounds another false note—a big one. Joan has worked at Pembroke for 32 years, we are told. That means she arrived there in 1989, 17 years after the passage of Title IX. She is older than certain prominent third-wave feminists like Judith Butler, whose slicing and dicing of multiple intersectional identities played a major part in the ensuing conflagration. But there is no way a feminist academic of Joan's vintage would be naïve about the latest Title IX rulings on her campus, or indeed any other aspect of gender-related wokeness.

The number one issue on the FIRE list is "racial inequality," which *The Chair* tries to

address through the struggle of Yaz to wrest tenure from the icy pale hands of a departmental committee headed by Elliott. The only African-American character who is not just a face in the rainbow chorus, Yaz gets a lot of screen time. But her character remains blurred. In one scene, she is an old-fashioned lover of literature who reveres Elliott's work on Melville and sweetly corrects a group of white male professors, including the dean, when they misquote Shakespeare. In the next, she is a radical disrupter eager to drag the Pembroke "dinosaur" into the 21st century. As for her cutting-edge pedagogy, praised to the skies by Ji-Yoon, it consists mainly of encouraging "close reading" by asking students to tweet their favorite lines from *Moby Dick* and turn Melville's daunting prose into amateur hip-hop.

The Standard Vulgarly

PERHAPS I AM BEING UNFAIR. WITH every passing headline it gets harder to joke about the woke. Any artist seeking to do so would have to up their game several notches above the standard currently found on Netflix and its rival streaming services, as they engage in a cutthroat competition for your eyeballs and mine. To illustrate how low that standard has become, we need only consider the sequence in episode one where the recently widowed Bill plays hooky from his morning class because, after seeing his only child off to college at the airport and dreading the loneliness now facing him, he gets hammered in the bar. He then staggers out to the parking lot, where he pauses to urinate between two parked cars, shocking a passing mother and her child.

To judge by the sprightly music, this is meant to be a delightfully antic scene. But it is not, for the embarrassingly obvious reason that neither we nor the passing mother and child behold the urinating Bill from the front—that would be a trifle too antic. Instead, we behold him from the rear, which would normally not be shocking, because ever since the invention of the trouser fly, the male of the species has been blessed with a discreet

and convenient way of relieving himself. But not here. Here, the goal is to provoke hilarity, and the gods of Netflix have decreed there shall be no hilarity without vulgarity. So Bill is obliged to pull down his jeans and expose his caboose for no purpose except vulgarity.

There is, of course, a place for vulgarity in comedy. Without it, Aristophanes would have been booed off the Athenian stage. But vulgarity by itself is not funny, unless you are a pre-adolescent or an entertainment executive permanently stuck in that phase of development. And vulgarity by itself is not satire, either, because satirists choose their targets. And to do that, they use their intelligence.

Almost a century after Bergson analyzed the cognitive dimension of laughter, the distinguished sociologist Peter Berger had this to say about it in his book *Redeeming Laughter* (1997):

The comic experience provides a distinctive diagnosis of the world. It sees through façades of ideational and social order, and discloses other realities lurking behind the superficial ones. The image of the jack-in-the-box, evoked by Bergson, says more than he proposed. One first sees an ordinary box, familiar and unthreatening. Then, suddenly, something or someone not ordinary at all pops out of the box. But it then becomes clear at once that this other something or someone was present in the box all along. The jack-in-the-box reveals that things are not what they seem.... For this reason, the comic is always potentially dangerous. As Kierkegaard saw very clearly, this makes for its affinity with religious experience.

This is the deeper problem we face. The state of contemporary higher education is ceasing to be funny, because fewer and fewer of us have the ability to see through the façades now dominating not just the campus but the larger culture. Or to put it another way: the jack of laughter cannot jump out of his box if the rest of us cannot think outside of it.

PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



Once More, with Feeling

A COMMONPLACE STATES THAT HISTORY RHYMES RATHER than repeats. But as the length of a coastline will vary according to units of measurement, what history does will depend upon the breadth of the criteria by which it is judged. Expressed in miles, the coast from Maine to Florida is a tiny fraction of its length in the millimeters capable of tracking so much more of its every crinkle, bend, and cleft.

If apprehended widely, in Shakespeare's "gross and scope," history does indeed repeat itself. Though vegetarian madmen with brush mustaches will not invade most of Europe, we are watching now as destructive forces rise in familiar form and are shielded by the mystic blindness that allows succeeding generations to recapitulate the tragedies of their forbears.

After the twin shocks of the Great War and the influenza pandemic, revanchist dictatorships established themselves in Europe and Asia, just as today. Despite immense superiority in position, armaments, population, and material wealth, the democratic nations in despotism's sights lost heart, courage, and, just as today, good sense. Time after time—in Ethiopia, China, the Rhineland, and Munich—the West lurched backward in gratuitous retreat, boasting that forbearance and surrender signified strength. As if on cue, we have done the same in the South China Sea, the Crimea, Ukraine, Afghanistan, submission to Iran, and retreat from the Middle East, the strategic nexus once justly recognized as essential to the stability of the three continents adjoining it.

China, Russia, and Iran pay rapt attention to the cultivation of their military powers. But the governments and peoples of the West have forgotten that the struggles between rising and dominant nations—in the main, at last call, and even if dependent upon their economic foundations—are decided by military strength. A skeptic might challenge this by citing, for example, the United States and Britain, but only if he ignores two wars and a century of naval competition.

Hopelessly beyond merely refusing to fight for king and country, we are materially obsessed, paralyzed by imagined privations and exaggerated grievances, and anaesthetized by snacks, drugs, and rock 'n' roll: i.e., addictions and entertainment. With lightning speed, what remains of the republic is dividing into countless racial, sexual, and ethnic Bantustans signifying nothing much more than the death of equality before the law. That this seems eerily familiar is because it is what civilization has spent centuries trying to escape.

As in the interwar years of the 20th century, spellbound national elites neither credit nor comprehend deterrence, balances of power, correlations of force, or the potentials of maneuver in the international system. To borrow from H.G. Wells's dystopian novella *The Time Machine*, because we American Morlocks have since the Second World War guaranteed their freedom at home and ability to venture safely upon the sea, the European Eloi have been schooled to believe in the power of performative diplomacy, multilateralism as magic, and—no more strikingly than in the Iran agreements—the

putrefaction of nuance that allows breathtakingly stupid officials to embrace enemies who with neither concealment nor subtlety declare their intent to conquer, ravish, and destroy them.

And while Europeans imagine that they are protected by the very making of agreements, thoughtless Americans believe even as the navy shrinks and rusts that we are protected by the oceans. The oceans failed to protect us decisively even centuries ago in the closely run Revolution and the War of 1812, when the tyranny of separation and distance were effectively that much greater. They certainly will not do so now.

IT ISN'T MERELY THAT WE AND OUR EUROPEAN ALLIES KNEEL before aggressors and fail to make the preparations necessary to repel them. We have fallen into a kind of Stockholm Syndrome not only of taking sides against ourselves but, as in the 1930s, of aping the authoritarianism of our enemies. Authoritarian governments never fail to elevate chosen segments of their populations and suppress others. Having adopted and praised this practice, which we call equity, we are now like them.

And how far are we, really, from China's Orwellian social credit system? Multiple GPS devices, cameras, and point-of-sale computers track us. Biometric and DNA tracing can either exclude us or pin us ineluctably to an event. Our presumptuous Google masters surveil us so they can, as they state openly and repeatedly, tell us what we want. And for those who fall into the trap, our social media magnify and preserve all the mistakes and idiocies that time once charitably allowed to fade away.

As if in the hypnotic sway of the authoritarians we soon would fight, prior to World War II we willfully and vigorously abandoned checks and balances, tried mightily to dissolve the separation of powers, limited individual liberty (a phrase that has never failed to nauseate the Left), tolerated the rise of domestic fascist and Communist movements, turned against republican principles, ignored the militant rise of Germany and Japan, put faith in spurious agreements, refused to read other gentlemen's mail, and scattered across the land public buildings that in their continuing blight have conferred upon Benito Mussolini a truly unfortunate species of immortality.

Now we imitate and repeat: "saving" the economy by attacking the engines of prosperity, adopting a dictatorial industrial policy beyond mere *dirigisme* and closing upon democratic centralism, disarming with inverse proportionality to the speed with which our avowed enemies enlarge their arsenals, and proudly diminishing every strength and asset that shields us from the chaos and destruction abroad.

History repeats itself as we are paralyzed amid locked-in repetitions that, almost majestically, roll through all things—as they will, and as they shall, should we not wake from our narcotic sleep. Though the fire next time may be hotter and more destructive than any in living memory, and you can sound the tocsin day and night, people do not come forth in numbers sufficient to do the work that must be done.

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