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An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren't Happy

This year, the Colorado State Fair's annual art competition gave out prizes in all the usual categories: painting, quilting, sculpture. But one entrant, Jason M. Allen of Pueblo West, Colo., didn't make his entry with a brush or a lump of clay. He created it with Midjourney, an artificial intelligence program that turns lines of text into hyper-realistic graphics. Mr. Allen's work, "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial," took home the blue ribbon in the fair's contest for emerging digital artists — making it one of the first A.I.-generated pieces to win such a prize, and setting off a fierce backlash from artists who accused him of, essentially, cheating.

A.I.-generated art has been around for years. But tools released this year — with names like DALL-E 2, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion — have made it possible for rank amateurs to create complex, abstract or photorealistic works simply by typing a few words into a text box. These apps have made many human artists understandably nervous about their own futures — why would anyone pay for art, they wonder, when they could generate it themselves? They have also generated fierce debates about the ethics of A.I.-generated art, and opposition from people who claim that these apps are essentially a high-tech form of plagiarism.

Mr. Allen, 39, began experimenting with A.I.-generated art this year. This summer, he got invited to a Discord chat server where people were testing Midjourney, which uses a complex process known as "diffusion" to turn text into custom images. He became obsessed, creating hundreds of images and marveling at how realistic they were. No matter what he typed, Midjourney seemed capable of making it. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing," he said. "I felt like it was demonically inspired — like some otherworldly force was involved." Eventually, Mr. Allen got the idea to submit one of his Midjourney creations to the Colorado State Fair, which had a division for "digital art/digitally manipulated photography." He had a local shop print the image on canvas and submitted it to the judges. "The fair was coming up," he said, "and I thought: How wonderful would it be to demonstrate to people how great this art is?" Several weeks later, while walking the fairground in Pueblo, Mr. Allen saw a blue ribbon hanging next to his piece. He had won the division, along with a \$300 prize. "I couldn't believe it," he said. "I felt like: this is exactly what I set out to accomplish."

After his win, Mr. Allen posted a photo of his prize work to the Midjourney Discord chat. It made its way to Twitter, where it sparked a furious backlash. "We're watching the death of artistry unfold right before our eyes," one Twitter user wrote. "This is so gross," another wrote. "I can see how A.I. art can be beneficial, but claiming you're an artist by generating one? Absolutely not."

Controversy over new art-making technologies is nothing new. Many painters recoiled at the invention of the camera, which they saw as a debasement of human artistry. (Charles Baudelaire, the 19th-century French poet and art critic, called photography "art's most mortal enemy.") In the 20th century, digital editing tools and computer-assisted design programs were similarly dismissed by purists for requiring too little skill of their human collaborators. What makes the new breed of A.I. tools different, some critics believe, is not just that they're capable of producing beautiful works of art with minimal effort. It's how they work. Apps like DALL-E 2 and Midjourney are built by scraping millions of images from the open web, then teaching algorithms to recognize patterns and relationships in those images and generate new ones in the same style. That means that artists who upload their works to the internet may be unwittingly helping to train their algorithmic competitors.

Even some who are impressed by A.I.-generated art have concerns about how it's being made. Andy Baio, a technologist and writer, wrote in a recent essay that DALL-E 2, perhaps the buzziest A.I. image generator on the market, was "borderline magic in what it's capable of conjuring, but raises so many ethical questions, it's hard to keep track of them all."

Mr. Allen, the blue-ribbon winner, said he empathized with artists who were scared that A.I. tools would put them out of work. But he said their anger should be directed not at individuals who use DALL-E 2 or Midjourney to make art, but at companies that choose to replace human artists with A.I. tools. "It shouldn't be an indictment of the technology itself," he said. "The ethics isn't in the technology. It's in the people." "This isn't going to stop," Mr. Allen said. "Art is dead, dude. It's over. A.I. won. Humans lost."

Source: NY Times

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An unusual boarding school in a small Indian city could be improving the lives of child brides

India has a serious child-marriage problem. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, one-third of the world’s child brides— or 240 million—are in this country. This ancient tradition not only deprives girls of education, but also makes them vulnerable to early childbearing, sexual coercion and violence. Typically, girls who are married young—that is, before they hit the legal age of 18—are not immediately expected to move in with their husbands or in-laws. Parents often wait till their daughters turn 15 or older to send them to live with their spouses. Veerni Institute, a non-profit in Rajasthan’s Jodhpur, is capitalising on that lag to provide free education for child brides across the western Indian state. “Household chores, traditions and the old custom where girls are married off at a young age and serve their in-laws keep parents from sending their daughters to school. The institute allows these girls uninterrupted education at a local secondary school,” according to its website.

The boarding school was set up in 2005. Primary schools in villages offer education till class 5—with most girls discontinuing studies thereafter. Veerni focuses on providing “seven years of higher education for the girls,” Mahendra Sharma, director of Veerni Institute, told Quartz. Veerni is a Hindi word for a strong and powerful woman. Veerni Institute is a part of the Veerni Project, a two-decade-old organisation founded by Jacqueline de Chollet, a Swiss national and human rights activist. The organisation focuses on providing education and healthcare for rural women. “The idea was to help women to take part in the decision-making and become the earning members of the family,” Sharma said. In the early days of the Veerni Project, villagers were rather hostile towards the idea of educating women. “On one occasion, men threw rocks at our jeep. We had to drive away immediately,” Sharma told NPR in a recent interview. The project started by teaching rural women basic skills, such as sewing and crafts making. More than 40 villages in Rajasthan were adopted, and the plan was to start literary centres in each of these villages. But teachers were difficult to find.

Around 75.13% of Rajasthan lives in rural areas, and the state has a sex ratio of 928 females per 1,000 males—lower than the national average. Moreover, despite the state’s average literacy rate of 66.11%, female literacy is much lower at a dismal 52.12%. “We thought, we need to give them a better education, a better facility. Taking them out of these hamlets, to an urban area like Jodhpur where we can send them to a private school, will make a big difference,” Sharma explained. The Veerni Institute was established as a hostel for girls, who are sent to private schools within the city. The first year, parents were called to Jodhpur “to show them the facilities that we would be providing the girls,” Sharma, who has been working with Veerni Project since 2001, said in his NPR interview. Parents were asked to delay sending their daughters to their in-laws, and in return the institute would provide boarding and education for free.

The institute today houses 70 girls from villages around Jodhpur, out of which 30 are already married. Several others have graduated; many are now registered as college students. Though it’s difficult to quantify any change in parents’ attitude, Sharma said he now finds parents to be more supportive about their daughters’ education. The institute received 300 applications last year, but could only accommodate 70 girls. “Parents are even sometimes willing to break these marriages if they understand that the girls can now pursue a career and become a source of a steady income to the household,” Sharma said.

That in itself is sort of a solution to child marriage, which is primarily practised out of poverty, and the mindset that girls are an economic burden. “A girl with a school diploma could also become a community health worker, or a policewoman, or a bank clerk if she has basic computer skills,” Sharma explained. “And with just two to three years of additional training after high school, a woman can get an even better-paying job as a teacher or a nurse.”

Or, it could simply empower the woman to raise her voice. According to UNICEF, the “unpreparedness to protect against any violation” makes child brides more vulnerable to further exploitation. Veerni, through social and legal counselling, is making girls more aware of their rights. For instance, Shobha received legal counselling from the institute, and she was able to divorce her abusive husband. “It is happening. Women are breaking off their marriages, and parents are supporting them, if they see there’s too much pressure from the in-laws or there is any wrongdoing,” Sharma said.

Source: Quartz

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Apple, the Ad Critic, Now Embraces Ads

For years, Apple has been a loud critic of online advertising that relies on hogging as much information about us as possible. Now, the company wants to become a bigger seller of online ads, and says it can do so in a less creepy way. This will be a test — with us as real-world subjects — of whether there can be a future of digital advertising that gobbles less of our information, or whether the status quo is too powerful to change.

Many companies, including Google, Facebook and obscure data middlemen, track our phones wherever we roam, record all the websites and apps we use and match up bits of seemingly small details like how much battery life is left on our phones. The digital advertising system is ugly but lucrative, partly because it works. Apple relies far less on these common online methods of tracking, but it might need to bend to this reality if it wants to become a bigger ad player. Plus, Apple's campaign to crack down on existing ad methods and sell its own ads opens the company to criticism that it's acting hypocritical.

It's incredibly profitable for Apple to sell ads when people search the iPhone App Store for fitness apps or read articles in the Apple News app. Apple won't mention it on Wednesday when it introduces new iPhone models, but the company wants more ways to earn income to keep growing as sales of smartphones stagnate. Bloomberg News and The Financial Times have recently reported that Apple plans to expand its advertising business, including by potentially showing commercials in Apple Maps and other sites and apps.

Other companies that haven't made money from ads, such as Amazon, DoorDash and Instacart, are increasingly trying these advertising side hustles too. Everything we click, everywhere we go with our phones and many of our personal details have become commodities to tailor advertisements to us. This might lead to lower prices because businesses know that I am more likely to respond to an ad for a cycling vacation than my neighbor, who is not so enamored with biking. But more consumers, lawmakers, regulators and companies want to put limits on this data arms race. Many of us feel unnerved by digital snooping but don't really have a choice. Apple offers an alternative — to a point.

One hypothetical example: The maker of a video game app can tell Apple that it wants to show ads in the app storefront to women using iPads in San Francisco who had previously downloaded an app from the same company. Unlike many other companies, Apple won't let that app maker single out people who recently visited the website of a competing video game or people whose email addresses are on file with the app developer. Plus, Apple doesn't permit ads that will reach fewer than 5,000 people, and it tailors ads to groups of people rather than individuals. Apple also says that a vast majority of ads on its devices are shown to people who choose the option of not seeing any personalized ads. Those people still see ads, but the ads aren't tailored to them.

Several digital ad experts said that if Apple wants to be a bigger player among data-hungry ad sellers, it will have to compete in a reality in which it's normal to harvest any morsel of our data if it might help sell socks. To appeal to advertisers, Apple might be pressured to be more intrusive and do things like recommend apps based on what other apps you use or what you do in those apps. Apple says that it won't do this, and that its ads that aren't personalized to people's interests are no less effective. Even so, the more ads that Apple sells, the more it encounters potential conflicts.

Last year, when Apple started giving iPhone owners the option to block apps sharing people's information with other companies, ad sellers including Facebook and Snapchat had to rebuild their advertising systems. Some smaller businesses that advertise to customers online said that Apple's changes hurt them. But that, and other changes in digital advertising, are empowering ad sellers like Apple, Google and Amazon that already have reams of data about us.

That said, experts said that Apple was mostly genuine about its commitment to steering digital life away from relying on collecting as much information as possible. One big question is whether Apple can stick to its principles to protect people and still make all the money it wants.

Source: NY Times

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Big Apps Made a Meal Out of Local Restaurants. Food Delivery Co-Ops Are Fighting Back.

When Grubhub came to Iowa City in 2017, Jon Sewell got what he describes as a “call to action.” He owns a D.P. Dough franchise there and had been using a delivery service called OrderUp to get his calzones to college students. But then Grubhub bought out OrderUp and doubled the commission on orders to an astronomical 30 percent, plus fees. At those rates, Sewell says, he lost money on every order. So in January 2018, Sewell joined forces with about 25 Iowa City restaurant owners who chipped in to launch their own delivery co-op called Chomp. The business, which now employs five to seven people full time and about 100 independent drivers, caps commissions below 20 percent, redistributes profits to the co-op members, and offers local customer service, which Grubhub had outsourced.

Sewell’s local experiment has national implications. At the start of the pandemic, food delivery apps, including the “Big 3”—Grubhub, Uber Eats, and DoorDash—were hailed as saviors, facilitating a takeout boom meant to keep restaurants and their staff working. But eateries were quickly confronted by a harsh reality: These Silicon Valley and Wall Street-backed firms, which together dominate 93 percent of the market share nationwide, are designed to scrape money out of local businesses—sucking up a combined \$9.5 billion in revenues in 2020 alone—and send it to shareholders. “The majority of consumers really want to support locally owned restaurants,” says Kennedy Smith, a senior researcher at the nonprofit Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR). “They think that by ordering food through the big delivery apps, they’re supporting them. It’s actually not, and that’s a real disconnect.”

Brian Rorris, who owns five restaurants and two bars in Iowa, calls the big apps “leeches.” He helped found Chomp, and argues that the delivery co-op, with its lower commission rate and local customer service, is “more beneficial to the market.” Iowa City seems to reflect as much: Chomp now works with nearly 200 local joints. Sewell has helped start a similarly successful delivery co-op, Nosh, in Fort Collins, Colorado, and followed it up with LoCo Co-ops, an unaffiliated company that has launched five more enterprises across the country and is now organizing in Chicago.

Should Big Tech’s apps be worried about a large-scale restaurant revolt? A September 2021 McKinsey report detailed a recent shakeout in third-party food delivery companies such as Uber bought Postmates and Grubhub was purchased by Just Eat Takeaway. The report hinted that the apps’ current business model sits on a shaky foundation, reminding investors that while they may have experienced “explosive growth” during the pandemic, “delivery platforms, with few exceptions, have remained unprofitable,” and that the apps’ high commissions were “unsustainable” for both restaurants and the apps in the long term. In the meantime, local delivery services are on the rise. A recent report from ILSR looked at 20 startups offering local delivery services and found that they could disrupt the big apps by offering lower commissions to restaurants, better pay for delivery personnel, and better hospitality.

Startups aren’t the only threat. During the pandemic, New York City, San Francisco, and other cities passed ordinances capping third-party delivery fees at rates ranging from 10 to 20 percent, which the companies are challenging in court as unconstitutional. Many cities used pandemic relief funds to pay for free local delivery, partnering with taxi companies and bike messenger apps. John Schall, a restaurant owner and former Economics Professor at Yale, cautions against excessive optimism. “I’m skeptical that co-op or other small-scale delivery options will ever make a significant difference,” he says. “If they are successful, they will get bought up. Everyone will have a price and the Big 3 will pay it.”

Meanwhile, the fate of independent restaurants may depend on whether they can stave off delivery monopolies. “I believe the biggest threat to restaurants is the one they’re least aware of,” Sewell says that the Big 3 could harvest local ordering data to form delivery only fulfillment kitchens known as “ghost kitchens.” Amazon does this on a mega scale, marketing copycat products directly to customers, thus undercutting their own marketplace clients. In 2019, DoorDash launched a ghost kitchen operation in the Bay Area. That concept has since expanded to other cities. “I have nothing positive to say about Silicon Valley and what tech has done to our society,” Sewell says. Local delivery co-ops are “my way of fighting back.”

Source: Mother Jones

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How Giving Legal Rights to an Indigenous Food Could Stop a Pipeline

In 2018, Frank Bibeau, a member of and attorney for the White Earth band of Anishinaabe—the largest of the six federally recognized Indigenous reservations that make up the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe—had an idea.

By that point, for the better part of a decade, Bibeau had been part of organizing efforts to stop the construction of Line 3. A pipeline set to transport tar-sands crude oil from Alberta, Canada, across 330 miles of northern Minnesota to Superior, Wisconsin, Line 3 was planned as a replacement for an older pipeline. But the new Line 3 would carry double the oil, enough to produce the carbon emissions equivalent to the yearly output of 50 coal power plants. After years of dutifully participating in the state's regulatory processes around Line 3, Bibeau was coming to realize in 2018 that he'd have to find a new strategy that went above and beyond the usual legal tactics used by environmentalists.

In addition to contributing to global warming, another central criticism raised about Line 3 was that it would perilously cross 200 bodies of water in northern Minnesota. Those wetlands encompass 389 acres of Manoomin—an edible grain that Bibeau learned to harvest as a young man. Known in English as wild rice, it's a staple of the meals, beverages, medicines, and cultural ceremonies of Anishinaabe people. The threat that Line 3 posed to what is considered a sacred plant—and that Minnesota made the official state grain in 1977—was indicative of a longer history of promises made to Native people that the state has failed to keep.

History had taught Bibeau that he couldn't count on the state's regulatory agencies to be sufficient environmental stewards, so that year, Bibeau drafted a law to be adopted by White Earth that codified Manoomin with "the right to pure water and freshwater habitat; the right to a healthy climate system and a natural environment free from human-caused global warming impacts and emissions."

The current system doesn't so much protect nature as permit and regulate the destruction of it. To give a tree or a river or in this case a plant legal rights is a novel, if not heretical, concept in Western legal frameworks. In response to a deepening ecological and climate crisis, in which the regulatory bodies tasked with protecting nature are too often captured by the corporate interests destroying it, the paradigm shift is catching on around the world. Rights-of-nature laws have been passed everywhere from New Zealand to Pennsylvania to Uganda to Pakistan to Florida.

In the final days of 2018, Bibeau's law passed. A few weeks later, White Earth leadership sent a letter to Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, alerting the newly sworn-in Democrat that they and the 1855 Treaty Authority had given wild rice legal rights, and pressing him on Line 3. Construction of Line 3 began in December 2020, and thousands of people came to different camps along the pipeline route to protest through the year, reaching their height last summer. Hundreds were arrested by state law enforcement and are still facing charges. In August, as the construction on Line 3 was finalized and the oil set to flow, White Earth filed a lawsuit in tribal court against the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The lead plaintiff was Manoomin.

"We've tried playing their game, we've tried playing under their rules and laws, and those things didn't work," Bibeau said. The latest iteration of the fight to stop Line 3 could be the plan Bibeau hatched in 2018: the rights of Manoomin.

While the history of American jurisprudence may be stacked against him, Bibeau sees reasons for optimism in how his lawsuit has galvanized other Native tribes around the country. He points to an amicus brief filed in support of the lawsuit on behalf of seven other Chippewa bands across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, who see Bibeau's strategy as a way to bolster tribal sovereignty. Will Manoomin see its day in court? Bibeau and Linzey see a path. The 8th Circuit Court of Appeals would have to agree to let the case proceed through tribal court, where there can be a trial to determine whether Manoomin's rights were violated by the effects of the 5-billion-gallon dewatering permit. "We're going to be patient, methodical and we're going to have a very thorough record created in tribal court, who are more deferential and understanding of our cultural values," Bibeau said. "I believe we have the right to demand consent, and that the state has to get consent from us. Because our rights are not in common."

Source: Mother Jones

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How will lab-grown chocolate impact west Africa's cocoa farmers?

They call it the future of chocolate. It's edible, melts, breaks, and even tastes like chocolate except it is grown in a food lab facility without using a single cocoa bean. While the production of non-cocoa chocolate is still in its early days with only a handful of companies producing it, their assertions of being more sustainable and ethical could one day shake up the chocolate industry. Given that 70% of the world's cocoa comes from millions of smallholder farmers in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, what would the mass production of non-cocoa chocolate mean for their livelihoods?

The agricultural expansion of cocoa in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire is the main reason both countries are losing their rainforests faster than any other country in the world. Côte d'Ivoire has an annual average loss of more than 200,000 hectares. These young companies of entrepreneurial food scientists are appealing to a consumer base that is socially conscious and expanding into a younger generation. But not all chocolate industry gurus agree with their approach. "People have an emotional connection to chocolate that they don't have to cornflakes," says Clay Gordon, a renowned cocoa industry observer and consultant. Yes, cocoa is responsible for some deforestation but Gordon says that "demonizing" cocoa production is not the reason to use advanced food science and technology to produce non-cocoa chocolate. "Alarmist language does not help anyone," says Gordon. "Cocoa farmers are barely earning a living as it is."

Cocoa is especially vulnerable because it is predominantly grown by smallholder farmers. He says these farmers have no collective bargaining leverage and fair trade isn't working to force major global companies to pay fair prices. Gordon sees a market for lab grown chocolate as similar to the growing market for substitute plant-based meat products. It is not competitive in the short term and hence will not have an immediate impact on the cocoa industry which many in west Africa depend on. However, in the event of an unprecedented global climate event or "potential disruptors," the rise in the use of lab-grown chocolate and other food products could be impactful. "Climate change is a reality," says Gordon. "The economics of doing this only makes sense if there is a wholesale decline of conventionally grown cocoa."

"We will have an impact," says Johnny Drain, co-founder of WNN Food Labs, one of three recent startups actively producing and marketing non-cocoa chocolate. Drain, who holds a PhD from Oxford University, sees as part of his marketing plan the need to address 'vast inequities' in the bittersweet world of chocolate. Drain describes himself as 'the Walter White of flavor, ferments & food design,' seeing himself as a renegade in the chocolate industry à la the main character in Breaking Bad. "We are also already talking to consumers about what is wrong with most of the world's chocolate," says Drain. "The more consumers know about how products are made the more they will vote with their wallets." Drain already sold out of the first batch of his company's non-cocoa chocolate prepared in May. He says another batch will be available in September.

California Cultured, a startup company which uses cell culturing to create non-cocoa chocolate, is set to "welcome to a new age of sustainable and ethical chocolate." And continues with "you deserve a delicious chocolate bar without guilt." Blue Horizon, an investment company with a mission to quicken the pace to sustainable food systems, has invested in California Cultured earlier this year. Planet A Food, a new food science startup based in Germany states on their website, "We were dreaming about a chocolate for which no trees had to be cut down, no precious water was wasted, no fragile ecosystems were disturbed, and no child had to work." "Cocoa plants are a very special thing," says Maximilian Marquart co-founder of Planet A Food, whose company produces 15-20kg of NOCA (factory made cacao) a day. "I don't think the demand for cocoa will ever be impacted by us." "Climate change threats are immense. It is something we all need to solve together." He adds

Mark Christian, founder and publisher of C-Spot, a consumer guide to premium and artisan chocolate, was somewhat surprised to hear of Marquart's production projections. Christian says the cocoa industry is approximately \$125 to \$135 billion a year from source to sale. Investing millions to process non-cocoa chocolate may become a necessity in the future in which both markets may be able to coexist, but there will be a jolt. "It will take a while before lab-grown chocolate can take down the industry, but they are certainly on course and there will be a lot of people in the industry cheering them on," says Christian.

Source: Quartz

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The royals have a duty to the Commonwealth: pay your debts, and apologise

I live at the crossroads of the Commonwealth. My home is Canada, where First Nations people have called on King Charles to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery as his first official act. This law sanctioned the colonial possession of Indigenous lands and has justified violence against Indigenous people. I live in the French-speaking province of Quebec, which was ceded to the British empire in 1763. Here, the proposed abolition of the role of “lieutenant-governor”, the crown’s provincial representative, is a flashpoint in the upcoming election. And I am also a member of the Caribbean diaspora, a region that was violently pulled into the production of sugar to satisfy the bourgeois tastes of the British empire. To this day, the Caribbean bears the scars of Indigenous genocide, slavery, indentureship and colonialism.

For the people of formerly colonised countries, the monarchy is not a neutral institution. It is the embodiment of imperial legacies that benefited Britain at the expense of its colonies, and played an active role in the slave trade. Queen Elizabeth I financially backed slave-trading voyages, and by the 17th-century King Charles II granted royal approval to the Company of Adventurers of London Trading to the Ports of Africa, marking the moment at which transatlantic slavery officially began. In the mid-20th century, when Caribbean countries were agitating for independence, the British government, under prime minister Winston Churchill, sent warships to British Guiana, a member of the Commonwealth, and openly removed an elected government in 1953. Even after Caribbean countries achieved independence, many remained members of the Commonwealth, retained colonial curriculums in their schools, and were sold consumer dreams by companies bearing royal warrants. Yet these associations did little to protect these member states. Indeed, when Grenada was invaded by the US in 1983, Britain did not intervene.

For remembering this history just when the Queen’s coffin is travelling through Britain, I might be accused by some of speaking ill of the dead. The media have been dominated by reverential comments and melancholic coverage. Some have focused not on the Queen as the personal embodiment of empire, but rather as the figurehead of political institutions (in Canada, for example, the media seem concerned about whether the Bank of Canada will change the look of its currency to reflect the King’s accession). The monarchy has been politically and economically devastating for former colonies. It has also had damaging consequences for those who live in its gilded cage. King Charles III was required to marry and produce an heir; as a consequence, he married into an unhappy relationship that eventually fell apart. Prince Harry and Meghan’s relationship has been the subject of racism from the tabloids and allegedly from royal family members, leading the couple to make the decision to leave “the firm”.

Britain and the Commonwealth now have a new king. What else has died with Elizabeth? Barbados recently made the landmark decision to free itself of imperial bonds by removing the Queen as head of state. Following the Queen’s death, other Caribbean countries may follow suit. The Caribbean is still undergoing the process of decolonisation; many countries are dealing with the open wounds inflicted by colonial conquest and resource extraction. They are shifting from being smaller nations within a neocolonial world that required they remain members of the Commonwealth, to becoming protagonists that are actively unsettling the legacies of empire through calls for reparations.

Across the Caribbean, countries such as Jamaica, the Bahamas and Belize are calling for reparations. These demands were only accelerated after the disastrous visit of Prince William and Kate earlier this year. Such reparations would mean not just an apology, but distributive justice between so-called developed and developing countries. Integral to reparations is the idea of repairing unequal, one-sided relationships. In his first address to the British nation and Commonwealth “realms”, Charles said “relationships change, friendship endures”. Yet friendship requires accountability, especially when there’s a power imbalance – such as when one side speaks of service and duty but such aspirations remain unfulfilled. Surely in 2022, 70 years after his mother ascended the throne in 1952, we have a more nuanced and accurate understanding of these issues. What might duty look like if we understood that debts need to be paid and apologists held accountable? What might public service mean if we understood that imperial attitudes and monarchic institutions must be abolished for an alternative future to be born?

Source: The Guardian

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What's really behind the failure of green capitalism?

Last week, temperatures crested at 40C (104F) in England, bringing the climate crisis to the fore and spurring a fresh wave of dismay. How is it, despite a steady drumbeat of extreme weather events, a rising tide of public outcry, and growing consensus across the political spectrum, that the world remains so profoundly far from the outer limits of the climate targets considered “safe”? The answer is increasingly located not in climate denial, but in a proliferation of non-solutions advocated by policymakers and business interests with varying degrees of earnestness and good intention, under the umbrella of “green capitalism”. These are proposals sold as urgent, pragmatic tools for cutting emissions or reversing ecosystem loss, but which in fact deliver neither. Take sustainable finance. By some estimates, assets invested with some sort of environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria now top \$35tn, prompting enthusiastic proclamations that private investors, driven by rational self-interest, are delivering a greener future. For many, it seems one really can “do well by doing good”.

Unfortunately, this sense of triumph is based on little foundation. To begin with, criticisms of “greenwashing”, in which corporations and financial firms mislead customers and clients on the ecological or social credentials of their products, abound. But the problem cuts much more deeply than a few bad actors who bend the (typically voluntary) rules. Instead, the underlying motivation of ESG investing is not necessarily to achieve the “real world” positive outcomes. Rather the goal is to minimise exposure to risks – whether climate regulation or labour disputes – that could eat into financial returns. For this reason, many ESG funds hardly differ from “mainstream” funds and indices like the S&P 500 (the basket of the 500 largest US corporations). Vanguard’s flagship US ESG fund, for example, has its top holdings in Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon. Tesla edges in at number six, followed by two different share classes of Alphabet (Google’s parent company).

It would be hard to argue that many of these would be the companies springing to mind when imagining investment in a decarbonised and ecologically thriving future. Nor do some of them have particularly sterling records when it comes to the “social” pillar of the ESG acronym, whether accusations of human rights abuses and forced labour in supply chains or allegedly illegal surveillance of workers. Moreover, while many might reasonably expect a major ESG fund to be investing in the urgent transition to renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure, instead, more than 40% of the Vanguard fund is allocated to tech and financials. Energy and utilities, occupied by many of the firms we might imagine are at the heart of decarbonisation, together make up less than 1%. Importantly, this appears to be the rule, not the exception.

While some specialist firms use their shareholding position to earnestly pressure companies to change their business models or allocate capital to upstart clean energy firms, much of the industry is interested not in directly financing a sustainable future but in ensuring their portfolios are aligned with one. In this sense, ESG can be much better understood as a means of betting on the likelihood of a greener, more sustainable future, rather than helping to build it. The logic underlying sustainable finance is a problem for the argument that markets are advancing a greener, kinder capitalism. Indeed, the trouble for green capitalism is that its proposed solutions strain to force the complexity of the climate and ecological crises into the narrow frame of “the market”, irrespective of whether the market is a viable arena for confronting them. As a result, these “solutions” are increasingly proving to be anything but.

The imprint of green capitalism can be seen in everything from a fixation on carbon markets to the proliferation of ideas like “ecosystem services” and “natural capital”, which seek to divide ecosystems into discrete “stocks” that provide services to the economy. By this logic, a whale is valuable insofar as it captures carbon and impresses tourists. To many, the idea might seem absurd, but with \$40bn in ecosystem service trading in 2018 alone, these concepts are increasingly mainstream. We live in a society structured and defined by market relations, and the idea that market-based solutions are the best, most pragmatic, and often only path to resolving most problems is powerfully ingrained common sense. It is, admittedly, difficult to imagine an alternative. It is also urgent and necessary. The siren song of easy win-win solutions to unprecedentedly complex and systemic crises is powerful, but must be resisted.

Source: The Guardian

This article has been edited for exam purposes

When activists attacked Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers,' they affirmed its power

When I see activists attack art, I feel the same revulsion most people do — and the sense of revulsion seems to be general and widespread. After two young supporters of the climate-change advocacy group Just Stop Oil threw cans of tomato soup Friday on a painting by Van Gogh in London's National Gallery, social media accounts erupted in outrage. Much of this was from people who are no less committed to stopping global warming, including much of the art world, where the climate emergency is at the top of the agenda for many artists, curators and critics. But while I can't defend the acts of Just Stop Oil, I can defend the anger of its supporters, who will experience the effects of global collapse further into the future than I will.

Art attacks seem to be increasing. In July, the Italian group Ultimate Generazione (or Last Generation) directed its ire against Botticelli's "Primavera" at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and in August activists from the same group glued their hands to the base of an ancient statue at the Vatican. All this is misdirected and counterproductive. It makes the urgency of the crisis seem ridiculous to people who are already disinclined to give credence to the science of global warming. And they create a false moral choice for those who love both art and the environment.

As 21-year-old Phoebe Plummer, one of the two activists in London, asked during Friday's incident, "Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting, or the protection of our planet and people?" The premise of her question, and the people whom she was addressing, are both poorly chosen. Very likely, given the self-selecting audience that visits the National Gallery, most of the onlookers would say: "Both." And it's ridiculous to think that art is the villain when it comes to the climate crisis. Van Gogh is too far removed from the economic forces that perpetuate planetary self-destruction for his 1888 "Sunflowers" to be worthy of even symbolic attack.

The art world, of course, isn't innocent. The wealth that fuels the art market is deeply implicated in the carbon economy, and the superstructure of art fairs, markets, biennales and blockbuster exhibitions is dependent on carbon-intensive travel and conspicuous consumption. Had Plummer taken her soup can to a high-end global art fair, she might have sparked a reasonable though painful conversation about the moral priorities of contemporary art patrons: Do you really need to travel to Venice every two years? Would your millions be better spent on mitigating the climate crisis or on a self-shredding painting by Banksy?

But the anger behind these attacks isn't irrational, and it isn't expressed blindly. So far, most of these incidents appear deliberately symbolic rather than direct acts of vandalism. The works that have been targeted often represent ideals of natural beauty and regeneration, the very things imperiled by global warming. The goal seems not to destroy art but to issue a warning: This is what will be destroyed if we continue down the path of reckless carbon emissions.

The media attention prompted by these incidents, however, could inspire more, and more deliberately destructive ones, which is one reason they are so disturbing. And the agita they create causes division within the social groups most sympathetic to the cause.

It is ridiculous to attack art in the name of survival, for art is an instrument of survival. But the attacks suggest a new way of thinking about art, in terms of climate, that may help deepen our sympathy for both art and the environment.

Why these attacks are happening in museums isn't just about seeking attention and animating the hair-trigger social and information networks that connect people committed to art, the environment, social justice and other adjacent causes. It is about focusing attention on the larger cost of everything, the whole of the world around us — history, culture and economies. Facing the annihilation of everything, the activists come to society's last truly sacred space, where the "everything" of human existence seems to be present. Throwing tomato soup on a Van Gogh won't make me feel any more passionately about saving our planet, nor will it help me think more pragmatically about how to do that. But I understand why young people, facing their own destruction, would come to a place of connection to say: Stop throwing everything away.

Source: The Washington Post

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England's football clubs are playthings for the global elite

On August 21st Newcastle United took on Manchester City in England's Premier League. Looked at one way, the game was a pulsating 3-3 draw. Looked at another way, it pitted a team largely owned by Saudi Arabia's sovereign-wealth fund against one owned by a company controlled by a member of Abu Dhabi's royal family.

Neither regime is noted for its sympathy for human rights. Amnesty International says campaigners for human rights in Saudi Arabia "continued to be detained arbitrarily, sentenced after grossly unfair trials or silenced following conditional release". In March Saudi Arabia executed 81 people in a single day. As for Abu Dhabi, Amnesty says of the United Arab Emirates, of which it is one, that "the government continued to commit serious human-rights violations, including arbitrary detention, cruel and inhuman treatment of detainees, suppression of freedom of expression and violation of the right to privacy."

Not so long ago, English football was a far more parochial affair. Clubs tended to be owned by local businessmen who had made their money in property or industry. A case in point was Sir Jack Hayward, a property developer who bought Wolverhampton Wanderers for just over £2m (then \$3.6m) in 1990 and ploughed a lot of money into improving Molineux stadium and building up Wolves' playing strength. Hayward sold his stake in 2007. Wolves is now owned by Fosun International, a Chinese conglomerate.

The TV money that has flowed into the Premier League has attracted not just global football stars and global audiences, but global investors. Many of these see an English club purely as a business proposition. Eight of the league's 20 teams are largely in American hands. Liverpool is owned by the Fenway Sports Group, which also controls the Boston Red Sox baseball team. Shahid Khan, the Pakistani-American businessman behind Fulham, also owns the Jacksonville Jaguars American football team and a wrestling outfit. The Glazer family, owners of Manchester United, also own the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, another NFL team.

For others, ownership of a football club is a form of conspicuous consumption; a trophy asset that shows the purchaser is part of a global elite. Sports franchises are not certain moneymakers; as fast as the money comes in the front door from fans and tv companies, it goes out the back in the form of transfer fees and players' wages. Roman Abramovich, a Russian oligarch, funded £1.6bn (\$1.9bn) of debt at Chelsea, a west London club with an expensive player habit.

Sovereign nations have even deeper pockets than wealthy businessmen to finance big clubs. Some critics regard buying a football club as a form of "sportswashing", the practice of using the game to distract attention from a government's oppressive actions at home. The same motivation persuades countries to host prestigious sporting events, such as when Russia was the venue for the winter Olympics in 2014 and the World Cup in 2018. This winter's World Cup is in Qatar, another country heavily criticised by Amnesty.

Until recently, the Premier League has shown little concern about the sources of club owners' money. The Saudis' takeover of Newcastle was significantly delayed, but the obstacle appeared not to be the regime's human-rights record but an allegation that they had pirated the sporting broadcast rights of BeIn, a Qatari group. Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave the Premier League a headache because of Mr Abramovich's ownership of Chelsea—and his links to Vladimir Putin. He was later placed under sanctions by the British government, which included restrictions on the club's commercial activities. Chelsea was eventually bought for £2.5bn by a largely American consortium, in a deal that prevented Mr Abramovich from getting the proceeds.

It is significant, however, that this shift took place because of government policy. Football has taken the money from global plutocrats and authoritarians because, by and large, Britain has done the same thing. Its governments have happily allowed them to buy property and businesses and shelter their assets in the country. Newcastle fans complained for years about what they regarded as the penny-pinching of Mike Ashley, a sportswear tycoon who was the previous owner. Many were delighted to get the Saudi cash and resentful of the idea that their club should be held to a higher ethical standard than others. The club has prospered under the new owners, who have financed some useful signings. Unless Britain turns protectionist, Premier League clubs are likely to remain the playthings of the global elite—including global authoritarians.

Source: The Economist

This article has been edited for exam purposes

Cancel culture blends into victim culture

One of the best encapsulations of the past few years of politics came from President Donald Trump about a month after he lost his reelection bid last year. “We’re all victims,” he told an audience at a rally Dec. 5 in Georgia. “Everybody here, all these thousands of people here tonight, they’re all victims, every one of you.”

This sentiment was central to Trump’s appeal to many Republican voters. In the 2016 election, a sense that White Americans were losing out in modern society was a better predictor of support for Trump than economic disadvantages. Trump voters, more than anyone else, saw racism against Whites as a potent problem and were more likely to view Whites as victims of discrimination at rates similar to racial and ethnic minorities. Trump promised to make America great again — to wind back the clock to a time before things such as Black Lives Matter, to a time when the distributions of the rewards of American society weren’t questioned. It’s hard to articulate this sentiment explicitly, so it’s coded, packaged in other ways. Such as the framing offered by Del. Kirk Cox (R-Va.), a candidate for governor in the state. “There’s been so much silencing and shaming because of cancel culture. It’s gone too far,” he said in an ad released on Twitter.

“Cancel culture” is an umbrella term for incidents in which people, usually public figures, have faced blowback for comments or actions, generally ones seen as culturally inappropriate. Definitions may vary, but it centers on the idea that some people have been “canceled,” exiled from society, for their views.

A poll from HuffPost released Tuesday found that while only half the country was familiar with the term, the vast majority of Republicans familiar with it see “cancel culture” as a somewhat or very serious problem. If you’re seeking a Republican nomination, amplifying those concerns seems to be warranted. After all, concern about the issue is more potent among Republicans who are registered to vote (59 percent of whom say “cancel culture” is a very serious problem) than among those who aren’t (most of whom say it’s only a somewhat serious problem).

Important to our broader point is that Republicans say “cancel culture” is something threatening specifically to conservatives. Eighty-one percent of Republicans familiar with the term who view “cancel culture” as a very serious problem say that conservatives are more likely to be negatively affected by it. The reason is obvious. “Cancel culture” is a concept predicated on categorizing particular views as verboten, and those views are often ones that overlap with a sense that Whites and men are imperiled. This is by no means always true; some concern about “cancel culture” also derives from social media bans, which are frequently predicated on toxic behavior. But it’s often the case that the concern expressed as part of the backlash to the perceived phenomenon is the same concern that Trump expressed to applause during the first Republican primary debate in August 2015: His obnoxious comments about women were simply a mark that he wouldn’t be beholden to a “politically correct” worldview.

It’s easy to pick out examples of times that public backlash to comments has seemed excessive as a way to cast social ostracization as dangerous and snowballing. But it is important to recognize the broader context for the movement. The emergence of Black Lives Matter in 2014 is in part a function of the ubiquity of smartphones, allowing people to document injustices that often happened in the shadows. That documentation spurred accountability and increased awareness. A newly visible culture of accountability expanded into broader and hazier questions of structural racism and sexism. The questions were always there; now, they have a larger and more receptive audience. So we get a backlash, manifested in concerns about the perceived oppression of Whites or other groups. In some cases, people who had largely avoided criticism were suddenly being criticized on unfamiliar terms.

Concern about “cancel culture” is an explicit manifestation of victimization by those who see themselves as a focus of questions about accountability and power. The message is that the cultural elites, including the media, are trying to silence opposing views. Conflating all criticism into some Big-Brother-esque effort at silencing half the country is a facile approach to the moment. Which, of course, is why it’s appealing to political actors.

Source: The Washington Post

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Concours
après classes préparatoires

Sujets de l'épreuve orale
Anglais LVB

2023

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In an Indian Village, Cultivating Girls' Big-League Dreams

A remarkable thing happened this spring: A new Indian professional cricket league for women held its inaugural season, a more than \$500 million bet on female talent in what is by far the country's most popular sport. The women's league is modeled on India's hugely successful men's professional cricket league, known as the Indian Premier League, featuring teams that are stocked mostly with Indian players but also include other top players from around the world.

In just 15 years, the men's Premier League has become one of the most valuable sports organizations on the planet. Teams bought for \$100 million are now estimated to be worth \$1 billion. Now, wealthy investors see an opportunity in the Women's Premier League, too, and are pouring in hundreds of millions of dollars. That means the kind of opportunities for female athletes that never existed before.

Opening up what has long been known as "the gentleman's game" sends a powerful psychological message to hundreds of millions of women and girls in what will soon be the world's most populous country. Gender roles remain rigid in India, where only about 20 percent of women are employed in the formal work force, one of the lowest rates globally. If the country is to meet its full economic potential, it must chip away at that gender divide.

In the case of cricket, at least, some of India's most famous industrialists are invested in ensuring that women thrive. The five teams created for the inaugural season, which took place last month, were sold by the league for \$570 million in total, or an average of about \$110 million per franchise. Overnight, the league became the world's second-most valuable women's sports association, after the W.N.B.A.

The splashy debut got an enthusiastic reception among fans, even if it paled in comparison to the ferocious following for the men. Some of the matches drew as many as 35,000 people. In recent years, contracts from the board that oversees Indian cricket, and efforts to reach pay parity between men and women, have brought some financial security for national team players. Now, with the advent of the women's professional league, India will need to develop a female talent pool up and down the country.

Mr. Shergill, founder, coach and benefactor of the girls' cricket team in Dharoki, is obsessive about finding exposure opportunities for his players — and every time, he makes clear that cricket is just a vehicle. Last September, the team traveled to Mohali, about 50 miles from the village, to watch the Indian men's national team play Australia. After the match, when the V.I.P.'s had gone home, Mr. Shergill took the girls on a tour of their section of the stands. As the girls enjoyed the comfort of chairs marked with the names of dignitaries, Mr. Shergill made a video of them. "This child — she is sitting in the chief minister of Punjab's seat!" This is what it looks like to chip away at India's rigid gender divide. The girls walk and talk with the kind of confidence and ease that come with familiarity with things beyond one's immediate life, with travel and exposure. They have seen the cities, they have eaten in restaurants, they have sat in the front rows of stadiums with cameras pointed their way.

Back home, their daily routine — two dozen girls challenging themselves out in the open, enjoying themselves — has become just another part of village life. Their presence feels as rooted as the peepal tree that shades the bench where Grandma Kaur sits to watch the drills as she snaps green beans for dinner. But it is also building toward something bigger, something beyond the village.

NY Times

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Bad Bunny Is [Winning in Non-English]

The Puerto Rican reggaetonero Bad Bunny kicked off the Grammys earlier this month with a rich cultural performance that included a masterful blend of plena, reggaeton and Dominican merengue. As traditional dancers of the Agua, Sol y Sereno collective, who wore papier-mâché heads that paid homage to Puerto Rican heroes, twirled around him, he sang in Spanish about how everyone wants to be Latino but they lack sazón¹. Apparently, along with sazón, the Grammys also needed closed captions.

Many Grammys viewers were puzzled when the captions during his performance read “[SPEAKING NON ENGLISH; SINGING IN NON-ENGLISH].” He is, after all, known for proudly singing and speaking in Spanish. CBS later clarified that it’s standard practice for live closed captioning to use these phrases as a catchall for non-English languages for live performances. But by the time revised closed captions were added for the rebroadcast on the West Coast, memes of the snub spread across social media. Some people joked that they were fluent in “Non-English.” Others posted about various activities that they were engaged in: cooking, laughing, dancing, working out and just plain living in “Non-English.” Even Bad Bunny got in on the fun, posting an image of the captions to his Instagram account along with other highlights from the night.

Like many jokes and memes, the moment spoke to a larger concern. It highlighted a shared feeling among Latinos, and other cultural minorities, that no matter what they do or how much success they achieve, they remain inscrutable to the American mainstream. Bad Bunny has been Spotify’s most streamed artist for three years in a row. He was the first artist to reach the top of the Billboard 200 albums chart singing solely in Spanish, the first Spanish-language act to win MTV’s artist of the year and the first Latino urban artist to grace the cover of Rolling Stone magazine. Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, or Benito (Bad Bunny) as he is known to us non-English speakers, has opted to lean into his Puerto Ricanness, doubling and tripling down on opaque references to Puerto Rican culture. For a community that rarely sees itself represented in mainstream media, the allusions feel like subversive winks and nods to those cool enough to be in the know. This is the magic of Bad Bunny: His use of “Non-English” feels more like a flex than a failing.

Before streaming platforms, it would have been difficult for artists like Benito, who don’t have a natural place on the radio dial or in record stores. But now, he and others can ride the accumulative power of clicks, likes and shares to global fame. His success has undoubtedly also had a transformative effect on the many fans who feel emboldened by him to unapologetically embrace their non-English language and identities — particularly as books about figures like Roberto Clemente and even Sonia Sotomayor are being banned in some school districts.

And let’s not forget that his music is not just about enjoying beautiful sunsets and dancing at beach parties in Puerto Rico. It’s also about living with power outages, a government mired in corruption and the feeling that we’re being pushed out of our homes and beaches by foreigners seeking to benefit from exclusive tax breaks. Puerto Ricans have much more to worry about than the captions at the Grammys. But they can still revel in small victories like the success of their compatriot and the visibility he offers them.

The NY Times

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¹ Seasoning blend used by many Latin American communities

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When George W. Bush Was a Hero

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Bush's mammoth program to fight H.I.V. and AIDS. That turned the tide of the epidemic and has saved 25 million lives so far. Think of that: 25 million lives. That's like saving every Australian. That's more than all the confirmed deaths from Covid worldwide; all the deaths of American troops in all wars in the country's history back to 1776. Bush's initiative was called the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR. It paid for antiretroviral medicines for people with AIDS and for efforts to prevent the spread of the virus, including to newborns through childbirth. Because of Bush, many fewer people were dying. How is it that the leading humanitarian initiative of our lifetime was engineered not by a globalist progressive but rather by a guy with whom we disagree on almost everything?

It was also 20 years ago that Bush began the catastrophe of the Iraq War, which claimed thousands of American lives and perhaps several hundred thousand Iraqi lives. The media dropped the ball in both directions: insufficiently skeptical of the Iraq War, and then insufficiently appreciative of something Bush did that was heroic.

Bush didn't start PEPFAR because he was under pressure to do so. The only real push came from a few leaders of a particular constituency: conservative evangelicals. PEPFAR didn't benefit Bush politically, and even after two decades and all those lives saved, many Americans have never heard of it.

Lyndon Johnson founded Medicare and pushed through landmark civil rights legislation while also expanding the cataclysm of the Vietnam War. It's easier for us to accept contradictions in someone like Johnson, who is now slipping into history, and more difficult with a figure like Bush, who still evokes raw fury. But it's important to push back at oversimplified, single-arc narratives. We humans already suffer from a bundle of biases that lead us to information that will confirm our judgments rather than question them and that will reassure us about the moral purity of our side and the depravity of the other side; we'd get more done and find it easier to work with others if we acknowledged a world of grays.

How do we possibly weigh 25 million lives saved from AIDS against hundreds of thousands of lives squandered in war? We can't: They are incommensurate yardsticks. A life saved in Uganda does not erase a life taken in Basra, but it's equally true that senseless warfare in Iraq does not negate the most important humanitarian program in American history. Both are real, and if we experience cognitive dissonance, that's because we inhabit a dissonant world. The failure to credit Bush for PEPFAR disincentivizes other presidents from starting grand programs. PEPFAR can and should be a model for other historic interventions. How about ensuring that every child worldwide can at least finish primary school? What about seeking to eliminate the curse of child poverty in America? How about ending cervical cancer worldwide?

By all means, let's remember the lives lost in Iraq and thunder at Bush for his mistakes there and elsewhere. But let's also honor a golden moment when a president did the right thing and provided American leadership to rein in one of the deadliest epidemics in history. While it may be hard for liberals like me to get these words out, let's try: We Americans owe George W. Bush thanks for his leadership in saving 25 million lives in our name.

The NY Times

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The Dangerous Decline of the Historical Profession

History, as the historian Matthew Karp has written, has become “a new kind of political priority” for people across the political spectrum, a means to fight over what it is to be an American: which values we should emphasize, which groups we should honor, which injustices we should redress.

Yet as Americans fight over their history, the historical profession itself is in rapid — maybe even terminal — decline. The humanities, including history, are often considered more an object of ridicule than a legitimate lane of study. Look no further than statements from politicians: Rick Scott, the former governor of Florida, assembled a task force in 2012 that recommended that people who major in history and other humanities fields be charged higher tuition at state universities. Even President Barack Obama remarked in 2014 that “folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree,” implying that if a degree didn’t make money, it wasn’t worth it. These material and ideological assaults have engendered a steep decline in undergraduate humanities majors. In the 2018-19 academic year, only 23,923 graduating undergraduates received degrees in history and related fields, which, the A.H.A. notes, is “the smallest number awarded since the late 1980s.”

Private groups, which traditionally provided significant financial support to budding humanities scholars, have taken the hint and increasingly stopped supporting the humanities and soft social sciences. It’s the end of history. And the consequences will be significant. Entire areas of our shared history will never be known because no one will receive a living wage to uncover and study them. It’s implausible to expect scholars with insecure jobs to offer bold and innovative claims about history when they can easily be fired for doing so. Instead, history will be studied increasingly by the wealthy, which is to say those able to work without pay. It’s easy to see how this could lead American historical scholarship to adopt a status-quo bias. In today’s world, if you don’t have access to elite networks, financial resources or both, it just doesn’t make sense to pursue a career in history. In the future, history won’t just be written by the victors; it’ll also be written by the well-to-do.

Many Republican politicians support “divisive concepts” laws that try to regulate what college professors teach. Are they aiming at an easy target in the culture war? Perhaps. But it’s also true that a humanities education encourages thinking that often challenges xenophobic and racist dogma. If there are no historians to reflect meaningfully and accurately on the past, then ignorance and hatred are sure to triumph.

Without professional historians, history education will be left more and more in the hands of social media influencers, partisan hacks and others unconcerned with achieving a complex, empirically informed understanding of the past. Consider Twitter, where debates over history regularly erupt — and just as regularly devolve into name-calling. If professional historians become a thing of the past, there will be no one able to temper these types of arguments with coolheaded analysis and bring a seriousness of purpose, depth and thoughtful consideration to discussions of who Americans are and who we want to be as a nation. Americans must do everything in their power to avert the end of history. If we don’t, exaggerations, half-truths and outright lies will dominate our historical imagination and make it impossible to understand, and learn from, the past.

The NY Times

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Proactive Policing Begins Harming Black People Before They are Even Born

Proactive policing in the US, the kind of policing activity intended to prevent crime at officers' discretion rather than respond to reports of problems, overwhelmingly happens as a function of racial profiling. Data points abound. Police officers consistently stop and search black and Hispanic drivers with greater frequency than white ones (up to 42% more, according to a large 2020 analysis), despite the fact that searches of white drivers are more likely to identify contraband material. Police stops led to hundreds of killings of unarmed people in the past few years, a disproportionate number of them black. But even before black people directly lose their lives to police brutality following police stops—Tyre Nichols, Daunte Wright, Philando Castile, and dozens of others—the stress caused by the mere presence of proactive policing in a neighborhood can pose a threat to black lives.

A study conducted in New Orleans and published on Jan. 25 in the American Journal of Public Health shows high rates of proactive policing in a neighborhood are linked with increased occurrence of preterm birth. The study, led by Jaqueline Jahn, an epidemiologist at Drexel University, linked birth records in New Orleans for 2018 and 2019 with census tract data on proactive police stops. One in five of the black people giving birth lived in the neighborhoods with the highest rates of proactive policing, compared to only 8% of the white ones.

The researchers analyzed the prevalence of preterm births in relation to police stop rates, finding preterm birth rates 1.41 times higher for black people living in areas with high proactive policing compared to black people living in areas with low policing. However, the same comparison conducted among white people didn't show statistically relevant differences. This is consistent with previous findings on the topic, suggesting that merely living in a highly policed neighborhood isn't what generates stress. It is rather the combination of racially determined pressures (potential for police intervention and brutality, lack of assured safety for children and family) that can become difficult to navigate.

Preterm birth is one of the most common causes of infant mortality, and it occurs much more frequently in the US than it does in comparable countries such as Canada and the UK, or in western Europe. The rates of preterm births are especially concerning among American black babies, who are born preterm at a rate 1.5 times higher than white babies. In New Orleans, the difference is even more striking: black infants are born prematurely twice as frequently as white ones.

Racist patterns of policing have been documented in New Orleans, and proactive stops are most frequent in neighborhoods with larger proportions of Black residents. Since white pregnant residents of the same neighborhoods didn't experience equally increased rates of preterm births, the policing contributed to further exacerbating the black white birth gap: black infants were three times more likely to be born prematurely than white ones in highly policed, largely black, neighborhoods.

These findings suggest that the policing itself, while not a direct cause of preterm birth, generates a chronic contextual stressor specifically for black people. But although the authors found a connection, further studies are necessary to understand the mechanism by which the stress of policing affects childbirth, as well as whether there are specific implications not only to being subject to the stress while pregnant, but before as well.

Quartz ZA

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A New Sierra Leone Law Finally Allows Women to Get Bank Loans

A cold afternoon in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. Traffic is flowing smoothly along Wilkinson Road before we pull over in front of a gate. A sign says: "The Beauty Bar." We drive in. Two young women usher us into a compound for women-led enterprises consisting of three different ventures: a beauty salon, a lounge, and a concept store for African content; The Beauty Bar, The Members Room, and Talabi Studio respectively. The visit is part of a media tour of Freetown's newly thriving women-owned businesses, organized by local advocates for women's rights.

CEO Nadia Kamara says the businesses have been thriving, adding 18 employees - 10 women and eight men - in the past two years, and even disrupting the market in the process. But raising capital was difficult. "We did our market research and came up with business plans, but access to finance as women was not easy," she says.

These entrepreneurs have high hopes for a new law allowing women access to bank loans. They are part of a growing segment of businesswomen who are changing Sierra Leone's business culture and economy through their tenacity and resilience in an environment dominated by men. "This country has gone through a lot in the past 20 years. Women have played a key role as peace enablers. We are in a part of West Africa where women are daily fighters," says Setcheme Jeronime Mongbo, the head of the Sierra Leone UN Women office. However, women have been informal actors in the growth of the country's economy, never invited to national decision-making processes. Women make up 13% of the Sierra Leone parliament, 13% of the cabinet, and 19% of local government, according to Massaquoi. Plus, Mongbo says, early pregnancy affects 28% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years.

The Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Act could change all that. There was singing and dancing when President Julius Maada Bio signed the bill ensuring women could not be denied bank loans because of their gender. The law also ensures equal pay for the same work as men and equal training and scholarship opportunities. "A male and a female shall have equal access and rights to credit and financial services, transactions and products," the law states. It has also increased women's maternity leave period from 12 to 14 weeks. This law represents a new dawn for millions of women in Sierra Leone who previously had to ask their husbands to sign for business loans or micro credit, and fresh opportunities for single women who had been largely blocked from accessing financing.

"Women in the private sector struggle to make money or impact. This is now a law, and companies must employ at least 30% women. We will have more educated women getting jobs that will afford them to come to a place like us," Kamara says. "It is a positive step on everything about including women. It is nice to feel like you are being supported under such a law. Access to finance will be exciting."

But for the law to result in true inclusivity in the country, says Maryann Kaikai, creative director and CEO of fashion design firm Madam Wokie, more representation in parliament, cabinet and the private sector will be key to erasing the narrative of a men-led economy. "When we have more women fighting for women, we'll have more access to information about where to find funding," she says. "But we don't have this information because we have men fighting for the same things as us, yet women have more responsibilities."

Quartz ZA

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This Nigerian School Accepts Plastic Bottles as School Fees

When a neighbor recommended Morit International School to Ijeoma Obiora three years ago and told her tuition fee was not paid in cash but through plastic bottles, she found it hard to believe. Today, her 13-year-old daughter has comfortably settled into the school. “Academically, the school is very good for my daughter. Financially, it removes my worries about having to provide education for her on a stringent budget,” says Obiora. “These days, the first thing I do when I see a plastic bottle that has been thrown away is to pick it up. I don’t even think twice, the only thing on my mind is collecting waste to take to school.”

At Morit International School in Ajegunle, Lagos, one plastic bottle equals one naira, so parents bring a lot of plastic bottles to be weighed and sold, paying their children’s school fees in this unorthodox way. Although it is the sole responsibility of the parents to gather the bottles for school fees payment, each student is encouraged to bring five bottles a day to teach them how to be “environmentally responsible children for the future.”

This school is a solution to the two major problems Patrick Mbamarah noticed in his community, Ajegunle, an impoverished area in Lagos, in 2013: The growing number of out-of-school children and too many plastic bottles on the roads. A certified lesson teacher, he decided to solve the school problem first. In 2015, he founded the Morit International School, also known as Green Minds Academy, and set the tuition fees as low as possible, to make it accessible. “I grew up here. This is my way of giving back to my community. Nigeria has an excessive number of out-of-school children.” said Mbamarah. However, he soon ran into an unexpected obstacle. “The tuition was 10,200 naira (\$22.6) for preschool and 11,200 naira (\$24.33) for primary school. But, to my surprise, many parents were still having financial difficulties and couldn’t pay the fees,” said Mbamarah.

Instead of giving up on his dream of providing affordable education to children in his community, Mbamarah began researching other avenues to raise funds. This brought him to the second problem his community faced. “I thought, ‘why not create one solution for both problems?’. I have an upbringing in recycling; my mother reused plastic bottles and nylons. So I knew there was a solution there, I just had to find it,” he explained. He soon conceptualised what is now known in his school and community as the Recycles Pay Educational Project. In 2019, Morit International School collaborated with two recycling businesses, the African Cleanup Initiative and Wecyclers. The two-year partnership helped parents lift the burden of fee payment because pupils’ school fees could now be paid through plastic bottles.

Flourish Jimmy, a part-time Mathematics and English teacher at Morit, said that despite the low wages which mean he has to run a side hustle as a private teacher, he is keyed into Mbamarah’s vision, and there’s no turning back for him. “Teaching my Basic Two students is fulfilling because I know I’m adding value to their lives,” Jimmy said. Today, people in the neighbourhood voluntarily gather discarded plastic bottles from the streets and keep their recyclables to give to the school. Mbamarah’s next project is to gather one million plastic bottles to keep 1000 children in school in the Ajegunle area.

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The Gravest Threats to Campus Speech Come From States, Not Students

America is facing a fundamental threat, and it echoes a dark past. In 1633, Galileo was forced to renounce the “false opinion” that the Earth circled the Sun since it collided with the prevailing beliefs of the Catholic Church. Shortly after publication in 1859, Charles Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species” was banned from the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. And in the early 1950s, during the McCarthy era, many university professors were subject to “loyalty hearings,” and some lost their positions because of defamation campaigns and indiscriminate allegations of Communist leanings.

Each of these episodes of censorship and repression of knowledge reflected the unique social and political tensions of its time. But the proponents of censorship and repression all had one thing in common: they were on the wrong side of history. The mistakes of the past are being repeated in this country, right now: The State Senate in Texas recently advanced one of three bills aimed at public colleges that would ban diversity, equity and inclusion activities, end tenure, and fire professors accused of indoctrinating their students. Several states, including Georgia, Idaho and most notably Florida, have passed varying laws making it easier to ban books and limit what American educators can teach.

Dozens of other bills are pending in state legislatures around the country with the promise of affecting what tens of millions of students will or won’t be allowed to learn and exerting a chilling effect on educators who fear for their jobs. The recent actions take aim at teaching about so-called “divisive concepts,” including the history of slavery in America and its legacy in modern times, structural racism, evolving concepts of gender identity, sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues, and anything to do with diversity, however defined.

Like those that came before, the proponents of these restrictive laws are wrong. They are acting out of political expediency, exploiting convenient political issues. They are mounting a direct and dangerous attack on America’s longstanding commitment to free expression, democracy and education. Legislating toward a future where the state decrees what ideas may be taught and debated upends a bedrock principle of this country.

Proponents of these laws attempt to justify them by repeating claims that universities are places where political correctness is important, and students are intolerant of alternative viewpoints. Students should not violate university policies and shout down speakers they don’t agree with. And peer pressure, like ‘cancel culture’ in the larger world, is unfortunate and sometimes suppresses debate. Universities work hard to prevent and address these problems. We need to support open inquiry and debate both inside and outside of classrooms.

But it is ludicrous to claim that state-sponsored censorship — which carries the full force of the government and can even entail criminal penalties — is justified by student misconduct or peer pressure. The ironic truth is that laws that prohibit the teaching of “divisive concepts” are themselves attempts to indoctrinate students into seeing the world through one lens. This is exactly the opposite of what colleges and universities should do. College campuses are a place for controversial issues and emerging ideas to be taught, discussed and debated. This is how we fulfill our missions of advancing knowledge and understanding in a democratic society. The very project of democracy means bringing together people who have different values and objectives and helping them find a way to work toward common goals. This project is messy but essential. If we can’t get it right on college campuses, then where?

The NY Times

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The True Cost of a \$12 T-Shirt

Fashion, it turns out, is the true opiate of the masses. Across the country, while inflation has siphoned middle class wealth, American consumers have enjoyed a consolation prize: Apparel is dirt cheap. In 1993 you could buy a T-shirt for \$13 — and get a midsize tank full of gas for about the same. Today the full tank would cost more than three times as much. That T-shirt? \$12.74. We know the human cost of this benefit. One sweltering day in Bangladesh 10 years ago, workers at the Rana Plaza garment factory complex raised alarms about cracks in the building. They were threatened with the loss of a month's pay if they stayed home. The building collapsed the next day, killing 1,134 people and injuring over 2,500.

A subsequent, legally binding accord between trade unions and brands improved building safety in Bangladesh. And yet, while that one problem was addressed, today even less attention is being paid to the welfare of the people who work across the industry. Over the last decade, the voices of the over 75 million vulnerable workers in the global garment and textile industry have been, like the products they made, steadily devalued.

It wasn't always this way. From the Industrial Revolution until the end of the Cold War, the apparel industry was the world's most important engine of human development. In mid-19th-century Manchester, England, the textile trade fostered technological leaps that led to higher wages and lower prices for consumer goods. Today that engine has stalled in first gear. The average garment worker earns barely half the pay needed to reach a decent standard of living. The monthly minimum wage for a Bangladeshi garment worker is equivalent to \$75, meaning a worker can make less than \$3 a day. Many are unable to afford staples like meat.

Younger consumers, who tend to be progressive and skeptical of received wisdom, offer the world's best hope for change. They are concerned about moral consumption, seeing it as a question of self-identity. In 2015, 73 percent of global millennials said they would pay more for sustainable products. That figure may grow even larger as millennial incomes continue to rise. Millions of users of sites like Poshmark and Depop are millennials and Gen Z-ers, many of whom are looking for a way to avoid primary fast fashion consumption entirely. Many young consumers are also obsessed with truth, and they aren't buying some brands' superficial greenwashing or flimsy claims of ethical production. Nor should they.

This presents an opportunity. We know young consumers are willing to pay more for clothing made by workers whose voices can be heard. And we all need to know that those workers are OK. A first, urgent step: Apparel companies should publish full, detailed social compliance audits, which purport to evaluate working conditions, at all upstream factories. Such disclosure would allow investors, other brands, consumers, activists, unions and, critically, the workers themselves, to audit the auditors and, progressively, be a part of more inclusive monitoring. True transparency may mean that companies need to invest more to listen and respond to the people who make their clothes. For consumers, that T-shirt might cost them more than \$12.74. But for millions of workers whose freedom and safety are every day held hostage, the cost of laboring in darkness is already too high.

The NY Times

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American Road Deaths Show an Alarming Racial Gap

An estimated 19 pedestrians a day, on average, were struck and killed by automobiles in this country in 2022. The year before, pedestrian deaths reached a 40-year high. While these deaths spiked across the board during the pandemic, the fatalities follow a clear and consistent pattern: Across the country, Black and Hispanic pedestrians are killed at significantly higher rates than white pedestrians. In Los Angeles, for instance, a 2020 analysis by U.C.L.A. researchers found that although Black residents made up 8.6 percent of the city's population, they represented more than 18 percent of all pedestrians killed and around 15 percent of all cyclists.

A study published last year by Harvard and Boston University deepened our understanding of this phenomenon by controlling for the distance traveled by different racial groups when driving, walking or riding a bicycle. It found that Black people were more than twice as likely, for each mile walked, to be struck and killed by a vehicle as white pedestrians. For Black cyclists, the fatality risk per mile was 4.5 times as high as that for white cyclists. For Hispanic walkers and bikers, the death rates were 1.5 and 1.7 times as high as those for white Americans using the same modes of transportation.

The design of our cities is partly to blame for these troubling disparities. Pedestrian and cyclist injuries tend to be concentrated in poorer neighborhoods that have a larger share of Black and Hispanic residents. These neighborhoods share a history of under-investment in basic traffic safety measures such as streetlights, crosswalks and sidewalks, and an over-investment in automobile infrastructure meant to speed through people who do not live there.

Decades of civic neglect, collapsing property values and white flight took a further toll on pedestrian safety. Sidewalks — which many cities rely on property owners to maintain — were left to crumble along with vacant buildings, turning a simple walk down the street to a bus stop or store into a perilous journey. One study of Florida roads found that the likelihood of a crash involving a pedestrian was three times as great per mile on roadways with no sidewalks.

As a society, we have been laying the blame for pedestrian traffic injuries on the victims ever since the 1920s, when pro-car groups backed by the automobile industry coined the term “jaywalking”¹ to suggest that pedestrians were at fault when hit by drivers. Engineering solutions like speed humps, lane narrowing, better lighting, the installation of sidewalks and “complete street” designs are far more effective at reducing pedestrian deaths. The ubiquity of speeding is not necessarily because people are bad drivers, but because the design of our roads — wide, straight stretches of asphalt meant for high speeds above all else — encourages them to do so.

Many American cities have already introduced what are known as “Vision Zero” campaigns based on the idea that even a single pedestrian death is one too many. Vision Zero can be remarkably effective. Death rates have dropped in many cities properly carrying out the program. Oslo and Helsinki, which adopted Vision Zero in the 1990s, recorded zero traffic deaths in 2019, and Helsinki had just two pedestrian deaths in 2021. But it requires a committed redesign of city streets and bikeways, not just rhetoric and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg recently said that “every infrastructure choice is a safety choice,” and in 2022 launched a \$1 billion pilot program to redesign roads with a focus on racial equity. Whether this federal action will be able to bend the statistics remains to be seen.

The NY Times

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¹the act of pedestrians walking in or crossing a roadway that has traffic if that act goes against traffic regulations.

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Sorry, You've Been Rejected. Now Let's Party.

It's officially college rejection season for many — and, of course, acceptance season for some — as high school seniors receive decision letters. The rejections are piling up at a staggering rate: Between the 2019-2020 academic year and 2022-2023, college applications rose by 24 percent, according to the Common Application report (this is partly because of the Common Application, a single application used by more than 1,000 colleges). The result is more rejections, with some colleges touting their low acceptance rates (or high rejection rates, depending on your perspective). College isn't the only rejection opportunity, of course. High interest rates and recession worries are leading to layoffs and a relative lag in hiring — so rejections are ample post-high school as well. Some graduate schools and even professionals are trying to combat the situation with their own rejection parties, rejection walls and even resumés filled only with rejections.

Social media and societal norms often tell us that we should conceal rejections and any negative situations, leading to the false belief that there's something wrong with you because you are rejected, said Mark R. Leary, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, who studies rejection. But rejection parties help us realize that this is an ordinary part of life, and they allow us to share our rejection stories. And, Dr. Leary said, these parties put a lighthearted spin on an otherwise unhappy and stressful event. "It's harder to take a rejection as seriously if we're having a party about it," he said.

Nick Hopwood, a professor of professional learning at the University of Technology Sydney in Australia, created a rejection wall of fame after receiving two rejections in a single day. Dr. Hopwood mentioned his rejections to a colleague, who told him how reassuring it was to hear that even he also gets rejected. "It made me think about how other people see me and see many other academics: We see the success," Dr. Hopwood said. "It's like seeing a swan gliding effortlessly down the river, and not the feet frantically paddling and hitting all sorts of stones on the bottom."

Barbara Sarnecka, a professor of cognitive sciences and associate dean of graduate studies and research at the University of California, Irvine, holds a rejection party featuring champagne, Roman emperor costumes and togas whenever her graduate students' rejection pile — for academic journals, conferences, grants, fellowships and jobs — reaches 100. Dr. Sarnecka began the tradition a few years ago to normalize rejection as a part of academic work. "By sharing our rejections with the group, we counteract the sense of shame and isolation that early-career academics often have," she said.

Laura Sanchez, 18, a senior at Downtown Magnets, was disappointed to receive five rejection letters from colleges including Pomona, Scripps and Cornell. But she was looking forward to bringing those rejections to her school's rejection party. "I have also been able to process and appreciate that I still have many options," she said, "which is extremely significant to me as a first-generation Latina who wants to make history within her family by being the first person to get a higher education." Her classmate Zhangyang Wu, 18, was rejected from M.I.T. and Princeton. "When you think about a celebration, you think you're winning something," he said. "But the rejection party is using this type of hype to help students express themselves. All of us got rejected, and it's a norm we need to acknowledge."

The NY Times

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