

The Thin Crust of Civilization

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Stephen Marche, *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future*. Avid Reader Press/Simon and Schuster, 256pp., \$18 paper.

Barbara Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*. Crown, 320pp., \$19 paper.

Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. Anchor, 224pp., \$16 paper.

Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. PublicAffairs, 320pp., \$18 paper.

Hannah Rose Woods, *Rule, Nostalgia: A Backwards History of Britain*. WH Allen, 400pp., £12 paper.

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 432pp., \$22 paper.

JUST HOW MUCH TROUBLE IS THE United States really in? And is the same degree of trouble common to the rest of Western democracy? A stream of editorials, essays, and full-length books suggests that things are very bad indeed. Of course, it's a fool's game to try to predict the future, but it's also what historians do, and it is part of our history to know that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. What we can see in the present is a very high level of anxiety about divisions and discordance on a national and international scale.

Yet are these arguments really worth considering seriously? Both Stephen Marche and Barbara Walter consider only recent civil wars: Walter focuses on the late twentieth century, uninterested even in the Spanish Civil War, and Marche restricts

himself to the nineteenth-century American war between the states as a precedent for what is in fact a work of fiction. But there have been very many civil wars, and I strongly suggest that it's well worth looking back a little further to the Civil War in the British Isles (which at least in part fathered the American polity, among other things), in order to think about how civil wars really start, and how we can tell whether one is imminent. This requires a much longer and deeper dive into history than a review of the past thirty years or so can provide.

The vast majority of prognostications of civil war in the United States are reliant on the idea that civil wars are caused by irreconcilable divisions within the polity, and the underlying thesis is that such divisions are abnormal. So most of the

prognostications are efforts to illustrate division. However, in actuality, such divisions are completely normal, and always have been. Most often, people have somehow lived alongside those fissures. Also completely normal in all known periods is a divisive leader. Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan divided the nation into zealots and haters: no civil war. Another very frequently noted sign of imminent conflict comes from Rachel Kleinfeld, who claims that a sign is that “ideas that were once confined to fringe groups now appear in the mainstream media. White-supremacist ideas, militia fashion, and conspiracy theories spread via gaming websites, YouTube channels, and blogs, while a slippery language of memes, slang, and jokes blurs the line between posturing and provoking violence, normalizing radical ideologies and activities.” Again, this is fairly normal, and usually a sign of a gap between generational norms. All across Europe in the sixteenth century, there were very frequent recourses to conspiracy theory, and also to magic, prophecy, crystal gazing, astrology, and a relentless demonisation of opponents through slang and satires. These phenomena spread rapidly through the press. Interestingly, in a period in which central government was far weaker than is the case at present, the result was not civil war, but a series of armed rebellions—until the Thirty Years’ War, which had separate causes, and the English Civil War, ditto: both of these were about which set of extremes should rule and suppress the other. We might therefore argue that when popular seething anxiety connects to simple fights for power among the ruling class, civil war is likely. By contrast with both of these, the Wars of the Roses had a ruling-class power struggle, but not a divided nation, and so the nation didn’t really get involved in the ruling-class conflict.

By contrast, and also neglected, the civil wars in Spain and Ireland (the latter ongoing for some) illustrate the way that a nation tends to divide over what is considered legitimate and what is considered legitimizing. In the case of Ireland, I do not refer only to the Civil War in the Irish Free State in 1922, which was essentially a battle between those who had been united in their wish to rid Ireland of British rule, but also to the ongoing effort to create an independent and united Ireland, an effort that has involved a significant body count during the last century, through terrorism from both sides. While it is evident that the majority of people who live in Ireland do not support extremism, it is also very evident indeed that they do not support “the Crown.” This was especially plain on the occasion of the death of Queen Elizabeth II, which was greeted by some Irish people with deliberately disrespectful cries of “Lizzie’s in a box.” This impertinence might seem more Derry Girl than IRA, but Irish humor has been fully incorporated into nationalist rhetoric; the comedic is a significant political weapon. As Stephen Millar notes in his study of Irish rebel songs, it was precisely because the public had overwhelmingly *rejected* a return to the violence of the Troubles that rebel songs flourished—they are not a sign of trouble to come, but a sign that the majority have tried to move on. Part of the settlement represented by the Good Friday Accord is a willingness to allow verbal dissent and the ballot box, in place of the Armalite. The country is still divided, and British rule in Ulster still unwelcome to what may even be a majority, but most people have nevertheless turned their backs on the idea of further violence as a way of resolving the issue. Continued divisions do not necessarily make for a shooting war.

In the light of these ideas about legitimacy, I suggest an entirely different checklist to allow any nation to determine the likelihood of weaponized civil conflict, based on a longer historical view than the one taken by Barbara Walter or Stephen Marche, or indeed Tara Burton or Anne Applebaum:

1. The two sides stop listening to one another
2. Atrocity stories circulate
3. The two sides begin to fear one another
4. The fear leads people to conspiracy theories
5. At this point, religion or some ideology external to the polity comes into it
6. The government loses automatic legitimacy
7. There are open displays of contempt for government authority, some of which come from within the government itself
8. The government is forced to try to legitimate itself
9. ...which is experienced as a power grab by its opponents
10. The fear escalates to the point where one or both sides begin to arm themselves
11. And repeat.

You can see that both the U.S. and Britain have hit the first of these points already, and arguably have reached the fourth too. However, it is unlikely at present that religion is going to play the decisive role that it did in the seventeenth century, although

some ideologies can seem just as powerful. To seem is not to be—the religions of the book have at their center a built-in incentive to sacrifice well-being in the present in the name of a taken-for-granted heavenly future. Marxism partakes of something of this, but the fantasies around us now are more dystopian than utopian, more hellish than heavenly. And then it's a question of how widespread the fear already is, and how widespread the religion, and how many people have started to take up arms.

The perpetual civil war

Perhaps the divisions that so alarm us today are normal, and rational debate the outlier. The British, after all, have always been nostalgic for a better past; even under Elizabeth I, people would remark that it was a good world under the old religion, when prices were low, while the Victorians longed for the chivalry of the Middle Ages. The American War of Independence was a civil war. The Mexican War, and the American Civil War were civil wars. The Jim Crow era divided the nation in exactly the way that Lincoln had fought the Civil War to avoid. The 1964 Civil Rights Act aimed to end that division, but in some respects failed in its object, and the result was at least in part the war on drugs and a war on African Americans, including the pseudo-lynchings of African Americans in police custody. Like many efforts to preserve legitimacy, it acted to call legitimacy into question, at least for those who opposed it. The Act, intended to dismantle racism, also meant that racial disparities persisted after the law was passed because discriminatory policies persisted under the pretense of colour blindness.¹

¹ Ibram X. Kendi, "The Civil Rights Act was a victory against racism. But racists also won." *Washington Post*, July 2, 2017, online at www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/07/02/the-civil-rights-act-was-a-victory-against-racism-but-racists-also-won.

Trigger? Roe states

Historically, a common trigger for the kind of rioting and rebellion that can become civil war is a decision taken at the center that does not represent a consensus of opinions in the governed. This is especially problematic when there are noticeable regional differences, of precisely the kind that characterize the United States at present. Arguably, such a decision was the Supreme Court's striking down of *Roe v. Wade*, and Stephen Marche openly argues that the ruling will lead to civil war, claiming that "the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has provoked a legitimacy crisis no matter what your politics." There has certainly been significant dismay, and some public disturbance in the blue states, whose consensual acceptance of abortion has been sharply differentiated from those red states where no such consensus exists. Yet it seems highly unlikely at the time of writing that this decision will lead to civil conflict. The only way in which this is likely to change is if some kind of fugitive act is introduced to restrict women from red states from travelling to blue states for a termination. Such legislation would create numerous potential tipping points and flashpoints, just as the Fugitive Slave Act did. Linda Hirshman's dystopian fiction posits a federal Fugitive Woman Act, making it a crime to travel or abet travel in interstate commerce for the purpose of obtaining an abortion. Under a governance without abortion, women are, in reality, slaves, and can be treated as property. It has in the past been argued that the overlap between Confederate states and anti-abortion states is in part due to the idea of slave women as reproductively belonging to their owners.

If we step back from this particular issue, we might consider the extent to which the books under review evade thinking about

triggers and conflicts by focusing on what they take to be new dividing factors within democratic societies. As soon as a writer turns his or her glance on a single potential issue, there is always going to be a risk of blowing it out of proportion, best exemplified by Sarah Churchwell's study of *Gone with the Wind* under the title *The Wrath to Come*. There is no doubt that Mitchell's novel is racist, and little doubt that it was racist by the standards of the 1930s; book and film together combined to support the Lost Cause myth of the gallant, outnumbered South standing up to Northern aggression. However, devoting some 400 pages to expanding on these widely accepted readings seems at best useless, at worst grotesquely disproportionate to an extent where important factors—economics, for example—are pushed out of the way in favour of culture. *Gone with the Wind* was published during the Great Depression, which is what made its portrayal of poverty attractive to a wide readership. It seems very unlikely indeed that even an immensely popular book and film can have had the extraordinary effects on popular opinion that Churchwell suggests. We might also contemplate the possibility that a similar lack of proportion afflicts both Applebaum and Burton, and also afflicted Marche.

In discussing the future, Applebaum stakes a lot on cosmopolitan and urbane values, on a world "where we can say what we think with confidence, where rational debate is possible, where knowledge and expertise are respected, where borders can be crossed with ease." But this world was never open to everybody, and nor were the places she calls the cul-de-sacs of Habsburg Vienna or Weimar Berlin. It always cost money to travel, even from Galicia to Vienna as the Austrian-Jewish novelist Joseph Roth did, and it costs even more

money to have the idea of traveling, and even more money still to have the idea of traveling far, across national as well as state borders, and it costs yet more money to enjoy the difference found on arrival, rather than searching anxiously for the same things available before departure. There has never been equal respect for all kinds of knowledge, in the sense of equal pay or equal status. However much knowledge a plumber or fisherman has, s/he is not going to command the salary of a leading economist or barrister. The wager of the society Applebaum wants was always that its underclass wouldn't mind *too* much. It turns out that they did, and they do. They probably always did, which made it easy for people from the grotesquely anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna in its heyday to Adolf Hitler to weaponize that exclusion as an attack on the talkers and thinkers.

But that kind of knowledge is in many respects the opposite of the kind used by the liberal democratic elite. Marche is sure that technology is on the side of the liberals. This hope seems misplaced. In *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, Peter Pomerantsev illustrates the frightening neutrality of the internet, including a supreme lack of interest in truth and harm. Like the printing press before it, the internet is better at presenting extremes than it is in brokering compromises. As everyone knows, internet sites like Reddit and Twitter are great places for a brawl, but perfectly dreadful places for reasoned argument.

The difficulty actually lies with the diagnosis of causation. In any society, however organized, it is likely that a majority will feel themselves to be losers; how might they explain that to themselves? It is obviously profoundly uncomfortable, and also not optimal, for people to decide that it's their own fault, that they should have worked harder in school. It is always

more comfortable to think of large structural issues, and here the dispersal of conspiracy theories via the internet plays a role. It is not unusual for particular groups to be singled out as responsible, and one form of this in the West is the Great Replacement, a conspiracy theory disseminated by French author Renaud Camus. The idea is that white European populations are being demographically and culturally replaced with other peoples.

It's not an especially novel idea. The racial concern of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century anti-immigration movement was linked closely to the eugenics movement that was sweeping the United States during the same period. Led by Madison Grant's 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, nativists grew more concerned with racial purity. Grant argued that the American racial stock was being diluted by the influx of new immigrants from the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the ghettos. *The Passing of the Great Race* reached wide popularity among Americans and influenced immigration policy in the 1920s. Then as now, this thinking was reassuring in a period when wages were falling in real terms and children were espousing cultural values different from those of their parents. These ideas speak to the transition of an economy from one basic type to another: from agriculture to industry in the nineteenth century, and from industry to knowledge and technology in the twenty-first century. A survey of Americans in July 2022 found that 41.2% agreed that "in America, native-born white people are being replaced by immigrants."²

The real threat of this ridiculous idea lies in its willingness to offer hope. Slavoj Žižek once said that the political right doesn't

²"Survey finds alarming trend toward political violence." UC Davis Health, July 20, 2022, online at health.ucdavis.edu/news/headlines/survey-finds-alarming-trend-toward-political-violence/2022/07.

redistribute wealth, but hope, promising that poverty and feeling unheard are just glitches that can be resolved by eliminating—delete whichever is least convincing in your area—false welfare claimants, immigrants, asylum seekers, the shiftless or work-shy, women taking men’s jobs, ex-slaves moving to the North, Jewish interests in banking, Catholics, aristocrats, extravagant queens, lepers, etc. etc. Among other things, it’s an alibi for the movement of wealth from the lower-middle-class to the rich.

The problem is that, cumulatively, the hope of living the life recommended by Applebaum has more or less been taken off the table even for the professional classes, and hasn’t been really on it for anybody else since the early years of the trade union movement. The disempowered people in former mining towns in Wales, or West Virginia, suffer the fate of knowing things are not going to get any better. The realization that hope will be endlessly deferred—hence the loss of hope—is the most likely trigger for violent action, whatever the hope package contains. Part of that is a loss of belief that your side can win, when winning means being able to deliver meaningful change. So—what’s the answer?

Argufying

Applebaum’s idea is probably cogent argumentation in newspapers or cafés. Unfortunately, a pack of busy psychologists have more or less proved that this can’t work. It’s hard to believe how easily humans polarize, but Ezra Klein lays out the scientific evidence clearly: on the slightest pretext, everyone from young children to adults will divide the world into Us and Them. And Us will happily harm Them even when doing so harms Us as well.

So how *does* any nation hold together? Klein’s answer is cross-cutting identities.

He defines identities broadly—ethnicity and gender, of course; economic and social class too, but also religion, politics, age, urban/rural, sports-team fandom, etc. It’s not a new idea; it’s quite close to the suggestion made by Edmund Burke about the salvific power of rural sports. The problem comes when these identities start merging into “mega-identities.” It’s happening now as conservatives, religious, older-white, and rural identities all align and merge into a single mega-identity, which then sees itself in opposition to another mega-identity: the left, secular, multi-ethnic, and urban. Klein adds: “The simplest way to activate someone’s identity is to threaten it, to tell them they don’t deserve what they have, to make them consider that it might be taken away. The experience of losing status—and being told your loss of status is part of society’s march to justice—is itself radicalizing.”³

Chris Bail set up committed Republicans with a steady flow of Democratic information and opinions, and also vice versa. On average, Republicans who followed the Democratic bot for one month expressed markedly *more* conservative views than they had at the beginning of the study. And the more attention they paid, the more conservative they became. The results were less dramatic for Democrats; they became slightly more liberal, though this effect was not statistically significant. Why didn’t taking Republican people outside their echo chamber make them more moderate? Bail explains: partisans do not carefully review new information about politics when they are exposed to opposing views on social media. Instead, they experience it as an attack upon their identity. Strong partisans felt that it was their duty to defend their

3 Norman J. Ornstein, “Why America’s Political Divisions Will Only Get Worse,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2020, online at www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/books/review/why-were-polarized-ezra-klein.html.

side. It also seemed to make them feel good. Many of the extremists delighted in getting other people worked up. The ability to influence others, however artificially or temporarily, is valuable to people who feel that they have very little control over their own lives. These people want to see the entire system suffer, a need arising from the experience of marginalization itself.

In a masterful ethnography of political conflict in the U.S. South, sociologist Arlie Hochschild argues that Democrats and Republicans not only dislike each other, but have also created “empathy walls” that prevent them from humanizing the other side. Republicans like Ford pickups, and Democrats prefer the Toyota Prius. Liberals like lattes, and conservatives prefer drip coffee. They now watch different television shows and prefer different music too. Experiences of marginalization have multiplied. And some sensationalist thinkers are keen to ensure that people who are not especially marginalized begin to fear that they might be.

But there's more

We have already seen one liberal response to the nation's division in dystopian fiction, and other examples could easily be found, including the recently televised *The Man in the High Castle* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. One significant example comes from the right wing. This is a book with a body count. The 1978 *Turner Diaries* envisages something called the System imposing un-American values (the outlawing of racist speech, for example). There is of course a completely successful, if genocidal, fight back. In 1983, the novel inspired Robert Mathews to create The Order, a white supremacist terrorist group; members murdered a well-known Jewish talk show host, Alan Berg, in Denver. When Timothy McVeigh was arrested after the

1995 Oklahoma City bombing, police found excerpts from *The Turner Diaries* in his car. It is difficult to predict when crazy people are likely to run amuck, but there is no question that people of this kind are still around, and still forming organisations with impressive-sounding names, names like Stormfront and Proud Boys and Oath Keepers and Grand Dragons. A narrative whereby something that has been taken away must be recaptured animates virtually all their rhetoric, which is invariably violent. In the *Atlantic* magazine, Tom Nichols argued in 2022 that the new Civil War is already happening:

We do not risk the creation of organized armies and militias in Virginia or Louisiana or Alabama marching on federal institutions. Instead, all of us face random threats and unpredictable dangers from people among us who spend too much time watching television and plunging down internet rabbit holes..., acting individually or in small groups... Occasionally, they will congeal into a mob, as they did on January 6, 2021.⁴

This redefines civil war to include what might ordinarily be termed terrorism or even revolt and rebellion. I think this redefinition should be resisted, because it carries an unusually high risk of bringing about the transformation it predicts. Indeed, if Klein is right to locate the problem in mega groups, and Nichols is correct to speak of smaller groups congealing into mobs, then holding off on a willingness to connect one group with another might be the best strategy.

I've been exploring the way that the ability to see patterns is predictive of a strong belief in them which can easily become a faith in the unseen workings of power. Once you begin to see the idea of

⁴ Tom Nichols, "The New Era of Political Violence is Here," *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2022.

the deep state, evidence is everywhere. Many do believe in the deep state, and also believe that it is a threat to them and their families. Decades of growing fear of Catholics eventually led to the English Civil War, and decades of resentment of minorities eventually leads to a “fight back”. But it isn’t always so. In his recent study of the 1549 Western Rising or Prayer Book Rebellion in Cornwall and Devon, Mark Stoye analyzes a large rebellion that led to a fortnight of what might reasonably be described as civil war. It had a significant body count, and yet it ended, and it is still called a rising. The profound paranoia of the 1678-1681 Popish Plot, described in detail by Victor Stater under the appropriate title *Hoax*, killed a number of individuals, and led to riots, as well as helping to delegitimize the monarchy, but despite vast numbers accepting the nonsensical conspiracy theory, there was no war, or at least not then. Perhaps a valid definition of civil war is the point at which everybody *has* to choose a side, even if they would prefer to remain neutral. If it is still the case that few take action, then it is very likely that any rebellious energy can be repressed by state power.

Guns

However, there is a particular snag to putting down such rebellious energies in the United States. In the US, there are 393 million guns in private hands. That’s 120.5 guns per 100 people. The figure for England and Wales is 4.6. In Australia it’s 14.5.

Why is the US such an outlier? Here is Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president and CEO, National Rifle Association: “Our Second Amendment is freedom’s most valuable, most cherished, most irreplaceable idea. History proves it. When you ignore the right of good people to own firearms to protect their freedom, you become the

enablers of future tyrants whose regimes will destroy millions and millions of defenseless lives.”⁵

Notice how this statement connects with the conspiracy theories discussed above. Freedoms are in danger from tyrants, and can best be protected by violent and armed action. It’s a ludicrous hypothesis: in actuality, if the US government wanted to destroy you, it would send in drones and heavily-armed helicopters. It could do so at any time. It’s not really the government against which you are defending yourself with a rifle.

Since the time of Machiavelli, there have been debates about whether citizen militias or mercenaries make the best armies in defence of the liberty of citizens. The United States and most European states have gone in opposite directions. Very few Europeans own guns, and of those, few would correlate gun ownership with the defence of liberty as opposed to field sports. The idea that a gun is needed to protect political rights is almost completely alien, as is the idea that a gun is necessary for self-defence in urban situations. (I taught a former U.S. Ranger who had done a tour in Helmand province; he came to Oxford as a graduate student with his wife and children, and was horrified to realise that he was expected to walk around East Oxford unarmed. I pointed out that nobody else was armed either. He still didn’t like it.)

Most research suggests that gun ownership is rooted in fear. U.S. surveys dating back to the 1990s have revealed that the most frequent reason for gun ownership and more specifically handgun ownership is self-protection. The perceived risk of victimization and fears that the world is a dangerous place are both

5 Rukmani Bhatia, “Guns, Lies, and Fear: Exposing the NRA’s Messaging Playbook,” *Center for American Progress*, April 24, 2019, online at www.americanprogress.org/article/guns-lies-fear.

independent predictors of handgun ownership, with perceived risk of assault associated with having been or knowing a victim of violent crime and belief in a dangerous world associated with political conservatism. It has been argued that the NRA's "disinformation campaign reliant on fearmongering" is constructed around a narrative of "fear and identity politics" that exploits current xenophobic sentiments related to immigrants. Applications for licenses to carry concealed firearms in Texas exploded after President Obama was elected. In a nutshell, these are individuals who already see the government as illegitimate because it is not led by people who are like them.

A 2013 paper by a team of United Kingdom researchers found that a one-point jump in the scale they used to measure racism increased the odds of owning a gun by 50 percent. A 2016 study from the University of Illinois at Chicago found that racial resentment among whites fueled opposition to gun control.⁶

This is an especially uncomfortable truth given the constant presence in America of white men pushing angrily back at what they see as the unjust liberal empowerment of Black people, from the Jim Crow era to efforts to thwart or overturn the Civil Rights Act. This includes not only the murderous coup in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, which returned white supremacy to a city that had successfully dispensed with it, but also lynchings. What, after all, is a lynching but a battle in a civil war against a single individual by a crowd? It is very evident that lynchings exist in part to deter other

Black men from taking actions that are deemed a threat to white masculinity, even simple and harmless actions. It would not therefore be entirely wrong to suggest that an American civil war has already started, and indeed has never really finished.

The Capitol riots of January 6, 2021, exemplify a probable response to disappointing election results when those results can be framed as illegitimate. Ordinarily, aggrieved minorities are highly unlikely to attempt any kind of coup, and even in the United States, the rioters were easily contained, with few casualties. However, nobody should count on this experience being repeated. The level of private gun ownership in America essentially reduces the legitimate U.S. government's power to the level enjoyed by the British central government under the early Stuarts—that is, relatively weak, although capable of annihilating its opponents very quickly indeed when it notices their existence. One of the unpleasant discoveries made by Charles I was that he wasn't able to impose his will on the country simply by raising his standard. He needed people to flock to it.

A critical part of legitimate government is the willingness of voters to accept defeat. It has come to seem natural to virtually everybody in the developed world constantly to question any authority, as soon as that authority figure says anything or does anything that cuts across what is taken to be unquestionable individual morality. Ironically, conspiracy theories that delegitimize governments have been an intrinsic part of democracy and a free press from the beginning. They are not new, and they are not the product of the internet; the printing press produced them just as rapidly and deftly, including the notorious forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. There are countless examples of conspiracy theories which

6 Jeremy Adam Smith, "Why Are White Men Stockpiling Guns?" *Scientific American*, March 24, 2018, online at blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/why-are-white-men-stockpiling-guns.

have inspired violent actions, anything from riot through rebellion to civil war.

This is where we need to pause and think again about what a civil war is. I'm going to suggest that a civil war is a successful rebellion. That is, it is a rebellion that is too successful to be crushed as soon as it is noticed by the authorities. The Oxfordshire Rising of 1595 had ambitious aims with regard to the distribution of land and food, but was completely crushed. By contrast, the rebellion of Parliament in 1642 was simply too large, too well-armed, and too well-funded and resourced to be dismissed.

So, in Tara Isabella Burton's book, it does not follow from the fact that Jordan Peterson has many followers on YouTube and on Twitter, that he is of global significance. Exactly because the evidence that he exists is easy to track, there is a tendency to overemphasise his importance. There is every chance that a public poll taken in Oxford High Street would show a that majority of people do not recognize his name. Why might this change? As discussed above, polarization is not defeated by exposure to uncomfortable messages outside the scope of our own opinions, but can actually increase as a result of that same exposure. In short, Burton probably risks igniting the very effect she describes.

And yet the same criticism could be levelled at the far right. It has required some extraordinary twists and turns for it to present itself as the enemy of "cancel culture" while organisations in its ranks work to ban books. *Maus* is a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman in which he interviews his father about his experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor. On January 10, 2022, the board of trustees of McMinn County Schools in Tennessee removed *Maus* from its schools' curriculum, expressing concern over its use in eighth grade English Language Arts classes. The board cited "tough language" and

"unnecessary" profanity (eight words, including "damn"), a small drawing of a (nude) cat representing a woman, and mentions of murder, violence, and suicide. Spiegelman himself said reading the minutes of the board meeting indicated the board was effectively asking "Why can't they teach a nicer Holocaust?" Board member Tony Allman said he was concerned about scenes in the book where mice were hung from trees and children were killed. The book also depicts suicide. "Why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff?" he said. "It is not wise or healthy."⁷

Note the slippage here. If suicide and child murder are *depicted*, this is for Allman the same as *promoting* them. In part, the logic rests on the idea that eighth graders are children, impressionable, and unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. The same thinking, however, lies behind far right efforts to ban sex education or books that are felt to depict same-sex relationships in a positive light. And yet it is those same right-wing individuals who typically express anti-liberal concerns about the cancel culture of others, so that each side depicts the other as a threat to freedom of speech. It helps Jordan Peterson's cause enormously when left-liberal newspapers like *The Guardian* describe him as terribly dangerous. By this the *Guardian* appears to mean his followers rather than Peterson himself.⁸ The ferocity on both sides is alarming, along with the mutual unwillingness to have a conversation instead of denouncing one another.

7 Francisco Guzman, "What we know about the removal of Holocaust book 'Maus' by a Tennessee school board," *The Tennessean*, January 27, 2022, online at www.tennessean.com/story/news/2022/01/27/why-did-tennessee-school-board-remove-maus-art-spiegelman/9244295002.

8 Dorian Lynskey, "How dangerous is Jordan B. Peterson, the rightwing professor who 'hit a hornets' nest'?", *The Guardian*, February 7, 2018, online at www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/how-dangerous-is-jordan-b-peterson-the-rightwing-professor-who-hit-a-hornets-nest.

Compromise seems impossible and concessions are a sign of weakness. If this is not yet a war, it is difficult to distinguish from one. Each side behaves as if each tiny battle is a titanic threat to everything it holds dear. Yet the same might be said, say, of the supporters and critics of J. K. Rowling, the supporters and critics of Meghan Markle, the supporters and critics of Richard Wagner and Mel Gibson and Jeremy Corbyn and Tucker Carlson. The world is full of tussles like this, shaped *exactly* like this. They are profoundly dreary and unenlightening. And yet this normalization of an us-versus-them mindset might, paradoxically, actually prevent the kind of serious armed conflict that would actually be a civil war. All of us are used to having our views and values angrily threatened (unless, of course, we never use social media). We are so used to it that most of us are probably on the verge of being inured to it.

So—what’s the answer? The question is always urgent because the thin crust of civilization is always fragile. My answer is simple and impossible: We need more history. We need the kind of history that acknowledges the good done by each nation *and* the price paid for it, and by whom that price was paid. To be sure, history itself is by no means simple or straightforward. Bitter debates over critical race theory, “patriotic education” and *The New York Times’s* 1619 Project reduce history to a tool for either venerating America or condemning it. In the U.K., *History Reclaimed* has sought vigorously to contest what it sees as the falsification of the nineteenth-century British Empire by politically motivated historians, while conversely the very histories critiqued by that group have argued ferociously that the Empire was always basically about robbery. None of this is the kind of history I mean. I mean the kind of history

exemplified by Ken Burns’s documentaries. In saying this, I nominate a series of interventions that have themselves been subject to a good deal of criticism. *The Civil War*, for example, prompted both venomous letters excoriating him for naming slavery as the root cause of the conflict, and criticism for all the time devoted to battles and biographies rather than larger social trends. But here’s the point, and it’s one that Burns makes himself: the clash of ideas *is* the point, an opportunity to stage “an argument with the intention of working something out, not with the intention of just having an argument.”⁹ In other words, the toxicity of the cultural wars is precisely the inability of both sides to see the value of engaging with someone who disagrees vehemently with you. Separate monologues, conducted above a million solitudes, are advertisements for tyranny, not for democracy. If we want to save the democratic state, we need to be brave enough to be bruised, to be criticised, and sometimes to lose a verbal fight. But we need to recognize the value of dialectic in the Socratic not the Marxist sense, as a way of working towards a truth that all of us can come to accept. In the end, and without falling prey to the politics of cultural despair, I venture to suggest that Western politics were built to withstand exactly what has ensued in the past two decades, including the rise of irrational extremists of various kinds and the proliferation and dissemination of conspiracy theories. What might be less easy to manage in even the medium term is exactly the nostalgia that drives most of the conspiracies. The Western world is in

⁹ Alyssa Rosenberg, “Ken Burns is an optimist. But he’s very worried about America.” *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2021, online at [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/24/ken-burns-is-an-optimist-hes-very-worried-about-america.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/24/ken-burns-is-an-optimist-hes-very-worried-about-america/)

transition from an industrial economic system to a technological capitalism, and it was precisely at the point when the world moved from agriculture to industry that the most vicious civil conflicts ensued. It may well be that parliamentary democracy was uniquely suited to an industrial economy and the idea of representation

workable only within that economy. In the more isolated and atomized world of global technology, we might need to be inventive—as inventive as the Founding Fathers were—about how best to create a governmental system that allows all its citizens life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A

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