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NEWS

Murder on the Beach

Paraguay's slain criminal prosecutor Marcelo Pecci made many enemies in his lifelong effort to protect the rule of law. One of them was Hezbollah.

BY EMANUELE OTTOLENGHI

Paraguay's criminal prosecutor Marcelo Pecci was a quiet man with a humble demeanor. He spoke sparingly and did not seek the limelight. He was also courageous. As a high-profile member of the Office of Public Prosecution, he led Paraguay's anti-narcotics, corruption, organized crime, and terrorism finance investigations, prosecuting the most powerful criminal networks in his country. He believed in what he did, and he did it well.

In recent years, Paraguay has become a key transit hub for increasingly larger quantities of cocaine. Foreign crime syndicates have moved in, both to work with and compete against local networks. As if that were not enough, much of Paraguay's political class is in bed with the narcos—Paraguay ranks among the most corrupt in the region. Politicians who do not take corruption money from foreign crime syndicates often run their own illicit businesses, such as large-scale cigarette smuggling and local marijuana production. Their crime generates more crime. Proceeds from the illicit economy are estimated to be between a quarter and half of the country's GDP.

At age 45, Marcelo was a rising star and a serious contender to become the next attorney general of Paraguay. That

made him even more dangerous to all whose interests he threatened with his investigations. And they were many. Marcelo's cases put jacks of all illicit trade under lock and key, making powerful enemies along the way. He inhabited a cruel world. His enemies were the enemies of the rule of law, transparency, good governance, and public integrity: mafias, terror finance networks, and the corrupt politicians who sold their souls and the future of their country to transnational crime. Marcelo must have known the risks, but rejected the lure of a lavish life bought at the price of cowardice. He was incorruptible.

Eventually, last week, they came for him.

Marcelo had flown to Colombia a few days earlier with his newly wedded wife, to spend their honeymoon at the Isla Barú Decameron Hotel, an exclusive, secluded resort on Colombia's Caribbean coast, near Cartagena. There, the happy couple announced on social media that they were expecting. But their child will never meet his father. On May 10, the last day of their honeymoon, as the couple was lounging on a private beach, two assassins rode a rented jet ski to the shore, dismounted, approached Marcelo, and shot him three times in front of his wife. The first shot was to the mouth—a clear message that he was being punished for not keeping it shut,

and the signature of a skilled marksman, even at close range. Within seconds, as Marcelo lay dying on the sand, the hitmen took off, returned their rental, and vanished into thin air, likely aided by accomplices who were waiting to extract them by land. It reportedly took 16 minutes from the moment they rented the jet ski to the time they returned it. By the time police cordoned off the area, Marcelo's murderers were long gone.

Marcelo's enemies all had the means and the motives to kill him in Paraguay. Going after him in a foreign country is a different story. That required a high level of intelligence, logistical planning, and execution. Murdering Marcelo required significant amounts of planning, intelligence gathering, and monitoring before the hitmen hired for the job could carry out an operation as swiftly and accurately as they did. By Colombian standards, Isla Barú is a very safe place. Knowing where he was and when—at a precise spot on the beach, rather than in his room, the gym, the pool, the restaurant, or the bar—required local, real-time, human intelligence.

And while details are still emerging, only three categories of suspects fit the bill for such a complex operation: a state actor, a transnational criminal organization, or a terrorist organization. In the words of Colombia's Director of National Police, Jorge Luis Vargas, those who ordered Marcelo's murder are linked to either "international radical terrorism" or narcotraffic. Yet those categories are not mutually exclusive.

Marcelo was murdered by an assassin who likely wanted to derail his efforts, grant impunity to those who hired him, and ensure no one would pick up the pieces he left behind. His death made front page news across the globe, in ways he might not have expected when he was still alive. He did not see himself as a larger-than-life hero—just a civil servant, performing his duty. The outcry is well-deserved, because every one of the cases he investigated and prosecuted has global repercussions. The dramatic spike in cocaine flows transiting Paraguay is heading to Europe. The money laundered for Hezbollah fuels conflict in the Middle East. The

weapons smuggled into Paraguay arm regional gangs and cartels inside and beyond its borders. The spiral of violence fed by the increasing presence of criminal syndicates in the country spills over to neighbors, in a downward spiral that is corroding the rule of law, governance, and public safety across the entire Latin American continent.

Marcelo disrupted operations of transnational criminal organizations operating inside his country, which include Latin American, European, Asian, and Middle Eastern crime syndicates. And he poked terror finance networks linked to Hezbollah, whose agents have used Paraguay for decades to self-fund through criminal joint ventures with the cartels. All bad actors in Paraguay have bought influence and impunity from the local political cupola, with lavish bribes. Any one of them, or a joint venture between them, could very well be the culprit.

Where there is organized crime there is money laundering, and for decades, Hezbollah has been a key financial service provider to crime syndicates across Latin America. It operates in multiple locations, with Colombia being a historic hub of cooperation with organized crime. But its facilitators also operate along all of Paraguay's frontiers, mostly in the Tri-Border Area, or TBA, a riverine junction of the Parana and Iguazu Rivers, which naturally separates the countries of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Hezbollah's regional headquarters are in the large metropolitan area that sits astride the frontier. The TBA is a magnet for all criminals: More than a pirate island offering a haven to fugitives, it is a global hub for money laundering. Money has no political connotation—criminals need to launder it and shop for the best service providers. Hezbollah financiers are the best in the trade, and have an ecumenical approach to working with infidels. Money, after all, has no odor, as the old Latin proverb says.

Marcelo's targets in recent years were increasingly located in the TBA, Paraguay's criminal hotspot. Historically, the TBA has been the regional hub of contraband and money laundering on a large scale for organized crime as well

as for terror groups, especially Hezbollah. That is what makes it a key suspect.

Hezbollah and Iranian agents have been in Colombia for years. Iran's influence networks have an established presence not only in Bogotá, but also in other parts of the country, where they recruit and radicalize locals through Iranian-controlled mosques and cultural centers. Their influence operation is run by a proxy of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, the U.S.-sanctioned Al Mustafa International University. Hezbollah has also been there for a long time, leveraging local Lebanese Shi'a expatriates to launder money on behalf of drug cartels. Their proceeds help Hezbollah self-fund over and above Iranian direct contributions. The combination of Iranian and Hezbollah networks creates a perfect environment to plan and carry out an attack. Not only do these networks have the capability to gather intelligence while seamlessly blending into the local environment; their connections to Colombia's underworld can give them access to informants and contract killers.

Last year, Iran already tried to carry out an assassination in Colombia against an Israeli citizen by contracting locals. That they failed says nothing about Iran and Hezbollah's capabilities to assassinate a man like Marcelo Pecci. After all, he was a Paraguayan on holiday—the level of security afforded to him was undoubtedly lower than that enjoyed by an Israeli target in Bogotá, and the intelligence gathering Paraguayan authorities might have done to ensure his safety while out of the country was likely minimal, even assuming they tried.

The case against Hezbollah is hardly airtight. Marcelo also investigated corruption at the highest levels of political power in Paraguay; he went after the growing menace of transnational criminal networks taking over his country. His murderers could have been acting on behalf of any of these groups, which could have used their own assassins, or subcontracted the hit to other parties, Hezbollah included. It is too early to tell whether Hezbollah was behind the order, its execution, both, or neither. But Hezbollah had both the means and also the motives to kill a man who had announced himself as its enemy.

In three distinct but interconnected cases, Marcelo took down key Hezbollah financiers in the TBA, dealing a hard blow to the terror group's illicit finance infrastructure there. He arrested two of them, Mahmoud Ali Barakat and Nader Mohamad Farhat, in April and May 2018, and raided their offices and homes. The evidence seized in those raids likely assisted U.S. prosecutors in their efforts to identify other members of their international network. In Farhat's case, two separate prosecutions (in New York and Miami) led to the indictment of nine additional people and possibly the identification of a third TBA-based Hezbollah financier, Kassem Mohamad Hijazi. Marcelo not only led the raids personally—he later worked tirelessly to have Barakat and Farhat extradited to the United States.

Barakat was a smaller pawn in

Farhat's scheme, but Farhat, now in jail in Miami awaiting trial, is a big fish. In court documents filed for his trial, U.S. prosecutors accuse him of running one of the largest drug trafficking and money laundering networks in Latin America. In 2018, the Lebanese Ambassador to Paraguay tried to intimidate Paraguay's attorney general into blocking Farhat's extradition. It didn't work, and Marcelo doubled down. In August 2021, Marcelo handcuffed Hijazi. Hours later, the U.S. Department of Treasury and the U.S. Department of State announced sanctions against him, his cousin Khalil Ahmad Hijazi, a Paraguayan businesswoman named Liz Paula Doldan, and five Paraguayan companies they used in a money laundering scheme worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

For months, Hijazi remained in a Paraguayan cell alongside other captives

from the Colombian and Brazilian criminal underworld, his extradition proceedings delayed by procedural gimmicks. If Hezbollah is behind the murder, this could be an attempt to block his extradition by sending a message to Marcelo's colleagues: Keep Hijazi in Paraguay, where we can buy you all up and orchestrate a sham trial, or face Marcelo's fate. It took Marcelo's murder, and an unprecedented outcry, for Paraguayan authorities to hastily approve Hijazi's extradition on Monday night, likely under international pressure.

Those who ordered this crime must pay the price. And those who seek justice must know they are not alone. They owe it to Marcelo Pecci's memory. May he rest in peace. ■

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NEWS

Victory Day in Kharkiv

As Russia celebrated May 9 with pomp and parades, Ukrainians began reclaiming a ruined city

BY DANNY GOLD

“It’s fine, don’t worry about mines,” says Anatoly, our military escort, as he leads us around trenches and fortifications that were occupied by Russian soldiers only days ago. It’s not a reassuring statement with the sound of heavy artillery and tank shells being exchanged a little more than a mile away. All around is the detritus of war—crumpled water bottles, twisted shrapnel and spent shells, abandoned clothing, ammunition boxes, food tins and gas masks all litter the ground, a single Russian book lying next to a dug-out mound of dirt that provided shelter from blasts. A few burned Russian military vehicles, one a

tank and the other an armored personnel carrier, are poorly hidden in a thin growth of trees.

“They stayed here from the 24th of February,” the very first day of the Russian invasion, says Anatoly of the Russian soldiers. “They came here without any fighting but now we’ve pushed them already in this direction to the border.” For months, positions like these were used to relentlessly shell Ukraine’s second biggest city of Kharkiv with heavy artillery, rockets, and all manner of explosives that rained down death indiscriminately from above. It is hard to describe the amount of destruction that has been visited on the northern and eastern neighborhoods of this city that once held 1.5 million people, and

one can only wonder what the point was of obliterating so many residential buildings and shops.

In the first weeks of the war, it even seemed as if the Russian forces would lay siege to the city as desperate civilians fled or hunkered down in underground metro stations and basements. But in recent days, the Russian lines, like the one we’re gingerly stepping around, have broken as Ukrainian forces have liberated village after village, in some instances pushing Russian forces all the way back to the border located approximately 20 miles away. The city of Kharkiv is no longer being shelled so badly that no one can sleep, and life has slowly started to return to its streets.

It’s May 8, the day before Russia’s Victory Day celebration meant to commemorate the Soviet Union’s victory over the Nazis, when we set out through northeast Kharkiv with Anatoly to the front. At the base where we meet him in the Derhachi district, a stack of border posts is being painted to replace those steamrolled by the Russians. We follow Anatoly’s car as it turns off onto a dirt road, the sides of the path pocked with the occasional hole from a mortar blast.

Along the right of the road is a

wide-open field, and to the left a wooded area where we pull over and park. Walking through the trees, we come upon a group of 20 or so Ukrainian soldiers digging out hooches in the dirt, chopping down small trees and stringing up black tarps. These are tired men, grizzled and dirty, having just rotated out from the front a few positions away to get some sleep while not under fire. I ask some of the men how they feel about Russia's Victory Day celebration tomorrow, and they just laugh.

It's been hard, hard fighting, they say. "Two days ago, there were [Russian] tanks burning up there 800 meters," Anatoly says, as we head back to the car to the next position, the men not in the mood for questions. We drive for a few minutes before he stops to let us get out and take a look at the former Russian positions, where he assuages my fear of mines and improvised explosive devices, a holdover from days spent reporting in Iraq and Syria. The ridgeline we're standing on is high terrain, across what seem like incredibly long fields east of the village of Rus'ka Lozova, liberated only a day or two before. The next village up north is Pytomnyk, where fighting continues and we're hearing the heavy exchange of fire (it will be liberated a few days later). Though my first impression is that we are exposed in a flat no man's land, not exactly a great place to dawdle, Anatoly and his men don't seem that concerned. He later explains that we are on terrain where the Russians can't see us, and besides, they're being kept busy.

When a city is threatened with a siege, when a more powerful, better armed, larger army surrounds and threatens to engulf, there is something inside those who have elected to stay and fight, however subconscious, that is willing to accept death. I've seen it before in Kobane, the Syrian Kurdish city that was only able to repel a rampaging Islamic State force at the last second with the help of strikes from coalition aircraft. People talk about a "thousand-yard stare," the blank gaze of someone who has seen too much of war, but that's a cliché. The giveaway is just as often in a smile. Those who have already envisioned their defeat,

“There is something inside those who have elected to stay and fight, however subconscious, that is willing to accept death.”

almost accepted it as inevitable, and yet continue to fight, will often offer a knowing smirk. The message is a simple one, really, and you find it all over Ukraine: "We're still here." They came as hard as they possibly could, and no one thought we could withstand it, and yet here we are.

We walk up ahead to some more entrenched Russian positions that have now become Ukrainian positions. There's a plethora of burned-out Russian vehicles, including tanks with their turrets popped off like bottle caps. I meet Dennis, a tall, lanky fighter who speaks a bit of English. He's from Kharkiv, but he had to send his wife, son, and daughter to Lviv. He hasn't seen them since February. He's been fighting since the beginning of the war, and I ask him how it feels to liberate his home town. "It was a very unusual feeling," he says. "It wasn't any fury or fear. It was just unusual."

Dennis fought in the east of the country for four years during the initial Russian push into Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014. He finished his military service in 2018, then went to work as an auto parts trader. When the full-scale Russian invasion started this year, he knew he wouldn't have a choice.

Like many in this region, Dennis is a Russian speaker. The Russian border

is only a 20-minute drive from where we are, and the relationship between people here and their neighbors to the north is a bit complex. Many have family on both sides of the border, and some consider themselves ethnic Russians. But that's as far as any camaraderie goes these days. "This is my homeland, this is my motherland," Dennis says of Ukraine. "We are all Russian speakers here, we have a lot of relatives in Russia. But we don't have any friends anymore from there."

He thinks he'll tell his family to come back home to Kharkiv soon, and he's anxiously waiting for the day he gets to return to his previous life. As for Russia's Victory Day, "They're not in time for the date, they're rolling back," he adds. "Victory Day is not for the Russians, they just steal it from the common victory, like everything else."

We walk back to the car with Anatoly, gazing into the impossibly green fields with rockets poking out of them at odd angles. "A lot of agriculture was here, and they spoiled it," Anatoly says, lamenting the corn and sunflower fields that now can't be harvested. After retiring from the military two years ago at age 40, he launched a successful farming operation. He's had to rejoin the military in the wake of the war effort, but he's more motivated than ever. His farm is in Russian occupied territory. "I had a 3 million-hryvnia farm," he says, equal to about \$100,000. "So we need to take it back." Then he laughs.

Though Kharkiv is mostly free from shelling for the moment, and some are ready to try to bring it back to life, checkpoints dot the city, and you can still hear the thumps of artillery on occasion while soldiers zoom around in civilian cars at breakneck speeds. Shops and restaurants are still mostly closed, their windows boarded up or shattered. Driving around in the center of the city, things can look perfectly fine for a moment before you come upon a residential block pockmarked with blackened holes, or a completely leveled building, a mess of concrete and tangled rebar.

It is the outskirts, though, that have borne the brunt of the battle. A few days later we head to Saltivka, a neighborhood of huge apartment blocks in

the northeast of Kharkiv, that has seen some of the fiercest shelling of anywhere in the war. The Russians seemed intent on leveling it, and have only recently been pushed far enough that it's mostly safe to be here. In previous days, the documentary filmmaker I'm working with, Olivier Sarbil, a highly experienced war correspondent, had spent time hiding in a basement in one of these apartment blocks with Ukrainian troops trying to advance as Russian shells tore through the neighborhood every few minutes.

Massive firepower was directed here, a residential neighborhood, fired indiscriminately, overkill for the sake of overkill. Everywhere is destruction, giant holes blown into 20-story residential towers, obliterated strips of shops, tangled metal in parking lots littered with scattered pieces of concrete. Ukrainian soldiers in deeply dug trenches still sit in front of the buildings, a few mannequins acting as decoys, and are tense at checkpoints. At one, I see a man with a suitcase talking to a soldier with a balaclava. He's come to return, to what is unclear.

Already, though, there are traces of cleanup and construction crews digging out the debris. This is possible because the Ukrainians have finally managed to push the Russians out of the villages just north of here—Tsyркunь, Cherkas'ki Tyshky, and Rus'ki Tyshky—only within the last week. But they're still susceptible to shelling, and we see a smoking crater in a house as we push forward.

All along the road connecting these villages are burned out tanks, APC's, military transport trucks, and civilian cars. Demining crews are still working through the area, popping in and out of houses and yards with their contraptions. These villages are made up mostly of simple one- and two-story houses, nice tidy yards with gardens and fences, and big agricultural fields where the streets end.

A couple of civilians sit by the side of the road in front of their homes and we stop to talk to them. Victor tells us the Russians were there until May 5, and that he and his wife spent weeks living in the basement. "When you're

"I was feeling this for 30 years. It's not about NATO. Russians didn't want us to live better than them, that's the only reason."

60, everything is scary," he says. "We still don't know whether we can go or not, we are just waiting for something."

Then he says he doesn't feel well, that he doesn't want to talk anymore. His wife thinks it's too dangerous to stay and says they barely lived through the previous night because of the intensity of the shelling. She wants to leave, by foot if they have to. She sits on the ground next to their bags, crying, as a demining team of soldiers emerge from the house.

Up the road a bit more in Cherkas'ki Tyshky we meet Vasily, a 67-year-old man who is chatting with a soldier standing in front of his house. He tells us all that the most intense shelling was on this 1.5-mile stretch of road. "There was a Russian checkpoint here," he says. "They are barbarians. They didn't even target, they just hit everything."

He stayed throughout the duration of the battle, and says he was saved by the fact that he had solar power in his house. He's one of the few people I meet that says he knew a war was coming. "I was feeling this for 30 years. It's not about NATO," he says. "Russians didn't want us to live better than them, that's the only reason."

Vasily tells us the Russians came to everyone's home looking for alcohol, and looted the homes that were abandoned.

He also says the Russians took his elderly parents to Russia. Though the Russian military has been accused of forced population transfers involving hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, Vasily says he was happy they went, because they were unable to get their medications during the fighting. "I can't say that it was a bad attitude toward us from the Russians. It's quite good because they gave them somewhere to live," he says. "We wanted them to be taken to Moscow where they have relatives, but they want to live here."

Before I can make sense of the situation, a Ukrainian military transport vehicle with a massive piece of artillery drives up and parks down the road. A frantic soldier emerges and screams at us to leave, threatening to shoot the tires of our vehicle if we don't, which generally isn't the best course of action if you want someone to leave. The Ukrainian military has been paranoid about journalists posting photos of their active positions.

Driving back towards Saltivka, we pass passenger vans and minibuses heading the other direction. Our fixer tells us they're heading to pick up the dozens of civilians we saw standing by the side of the road with their bags. Later that afternoon, Tsyркunь will be shelled again.

Another day we go in a press convoy of five vehicles to the southeast of Kharkiv, arranged by the military press office. The small village of Mala Rohan, population 2,500, was cleared more than a month ago, though a few civilians have started to move back. It still lies fairly empty, dozens of houses torn apart from shelling, with bright spring flowers popping up through the rubble. Every village in Ukraine, no matter how small or war scarred, seems to have yards with bright flowers blooming everywhere.

These press convoys can feel like a weird tourist jaunt, a Disneyland ride of destruction, as the press officer leads a dozen journalists to shoot footage of shattered houses, burned-out tanks now rusting behind sheds, and even some dead Russian soldiers who seem like they might have been left there to ease the jobs of photojournalists.

At the nearby village of Biskvitne, there's a blown-up Russian helicopter in a field with Z painted on the tail and the smell of dead bodies at the entrance, but we don't go looking for the source. I meet Vladimir, a 39-year-old tractor driver in a Guns N' Roses T-shirt, and his wife, Svetlana, a baker. They're standing in front of their house on a dirt road, taking stock of the damage.

"The Russians came to us on the 26th of February and said we came to liberate you, we came to save you," says Svetlana. "Save us from who?"

"I thought we were going to be killed," adds Vladimir. "It was all very sudden. All the people here came into the street, and a column of soldiers was coming and one of the tanks. They said don't be afraid, we will defend you."

They've been hiding in a basement of one of their neighbors' houses with 30 other people for most of the last two months. Vladimir says he never thought war would come to the village, the thought didn't even cross his mind. Anyone in the village with money left as soon as they could, but he and Svetlana were unable to. "We saw everything," he adds. "It was terrifying."

They can't live in their house at the moment and are currently staying with Svetlana's sister, where they've left their 5-year-old daughter today. Svetlana says she doesn't know where they'll live, but they're already cleaning up the house and making repairs. They don't have any other option.

As the week drags on, Kharkiv continues to reopen. We see long lines of people waiting for food donations and supplies, but others are walking their dogs, riding bikes, going to the supermarket. Every day there's more and more people in the street, more clean-up crews, more shops open. The center of Kharkiv starts to see something it hasn't seen since the early weeks of the war: traffic. A photographer who has been here nearly two months tells me he's amazed that the city is coming back to life. After so much time spent in basements and bomb shelters, he says he finds it disorienting that we can now go into a hipster cafe and order a risotto.

Our days develop a familiar rhythm.

In the morning, we check open-source information pages and various Telegram and Viber updates to see what villages may have been liberated or what may have been found, and message other reporters while our fixer calls various military and territorial defense contacts to ask where we might be able to go. We head to the outskirts in the north and east, only to get denied at checkpoints we breezed through the day before. Then we bypass them by taking side streets through empty villages, where every fourth house has a giant hole in the roof or wall.

Civilians line some roads with suitcases and whatever they can carry, looking for rides out of their devastated villages. In recently liberated or cleared villages, civilians are also seen clutching suitcases, but they're going back to their homes, hoping against the odds that their previous lives will be salvageable.

The civilians we speak to all have similar stories, each devastating in its own way. They never thought war would come, they spent weeks or months in the basements hiding from shelling—little food, no power, no heat. The lucky ones have homes that are still inhabitable. The others all ask, "Where will I go now?" No one has answers for them.

Sometimes we go to the recently reopened hipster cafe and get pancakes or spaghetti carbonara. At night, everything is closed and curfew prevents us from moving around, so we look for updates on troop movements and areas that have been shelled. One evening, the corpses of nearly a dozen Russian soldiers are found. Two nights later, the corpses of nearly a dozen Ukrainian soldiers are found.

As Ukrainian forces mop up villages and push the Russians closer and closer to the border, barring a counteroffensive, the war in Kharkiv and the surrounding areas seems to be reaching its end. In the morning we'll try to go see the dead and those lucky to be alive—the recently homeless, childless, and parentless. ■

This article was originally published on May 16, 2022.



Album of the Week

Arcade Fire, *WE*

On Arcade Fire's last album, *Everything Now*, lead singer Win Butler sang about a young fan who wanted to kill herself listening to the band's debut. It spoke to the outsize impact of 2004's *Funeral*, the album that transformed an obscure Canadian band into indie royalty.

Years later, some would knock *Funeral* as too apolitical, trading in vagaries as opposed to anything concrete: "God knows what any of it meant, but the way he sang it sounded like it meant something."

It would be hard to apply that same critique to the band's newest offering, *WE*. If the millennial experience was first defined by a feeling that things were going to get better, *WE* finds peace with the fact that they're not. But on *WE*, Arcade Fire offers the next step: escape. "Gotta get the spirit out of me / This anxiety that's inside of me," Butler and Régine Chassagne sing, and it's hard not to nod along. But how to escape?

If the album begins paralyzed with anxiety, it ends trying to find something new and helpful: Wanting something more, wanting it all over again, wanting to transform into a stronger collective. These urges don't all make sense together, which is why it's a good thing that Arcade Fire is making an album and not a manifesto. Desires contradict and fight each other on *WE*. The result is the best album the band has made in years.

—David Meir Grossman

Three Big Questions That the American Establishment Got Wrong

Who benefited from the obvious nonsense that became post-Cold War America's trade, foreign, and federal deficit policies?

BY MICHAEL LIND

In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, there have been three great public policy debates in the United States—one about trade, another about U.S. foreign policy, and a third about the federal deficit. In all three of these debates, the side that made the most plausible arguments lost and the side with the most illogical and factually unsupported arguments won. In all three cases, the misguided establishment position set the flawed and unstable foundations for the world we live in today—producing catastrophic and lasting consequences for Americans and others.

The first of these hugely consequential debates was one in the 1990s about “globalization” or the liberalization of trade and investment following the end of the Cold War. Skeptics raised two concerns about globalization. They warned that treaties like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that effectively merged the U.S. labor market with that of poor countries like Mexico would enable U.S. manufacturing firms to shut down production in the United States and transfer it to take advantage of low wages, sweatshop working conditions, and the lack of environmental laws and regulatory agencies. The skeptics also warned of the consequences of opening America's markets further to

mercantilist regimes like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and post-Maoist China. Individual firms in a liberal market economy like the United States, they said, could not hope to compete with foreign firms whose governments rigged competition on their behalf through tricks like currency manipulation, nontariff barriers to American imports, low-interest loans, and other tools from the arsenal of economic nationalism.

Not to worry! replied the cheerleaders of globalization in the 1990s, including President Bill Clinton and pundits like Thomas Friedman. If the United States lost industries to trading partners because of low wages or cheating by foreign governments, then good riddance: America would happily specialize in the “knowledge economy” and the “industries of the future,” centered in the Silicon Valley universes of software and startups. Laid-off factory workers in the industrial states could move to San Francisco and “learn to code” in return for higher wages and better benefits.

The second controversy involved foreign policy. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the direction of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy was the subject of a vigorous debate. Neoconservatives like Charles Krauthammer and Bill Kristol argued that the United States should take advantage of the weakness of post-Soviet Russia and China and establish a global Pax Americana, whose

prospective grandeur some neocons compared to that of the British and Roman empires. At the opposite extreme, the isolationist Patrick Buchanan called for a return to pre-1941 America isolationism. In between, realists like Samuel P. Huntington and Jeane Kirkpatrick rejected messianic ideas about American global empire and isolationist solipsism in favor of the idea of the U.S. as “an ordinary country”—Kirkpatrick's phrase—pursuing traditional balance-of-power politics in a multipolar world.

The third great debate involved the federal deficit. It is easy to forget how central alarmism about the national debt was to American public discourse between the 1980s and the 2010s. As early as 1984, Democratic candidate Walter Mondale made deficit reduction a major theme of his campaign. So did Ross Perot, in his 1992 independent run for the presidency. To the ornithological lexicon of American politics were added two new species: “deficit hawks” and “deficit doves.”

Deficit hawks drew public attention to long-term projections of the solvency of Medicare and, in particular, Social Security. Once the Social Security trust fund was exhausted, these projections showed, payroll taxes at present rates would be inadequate to meet Social Security obligations to retirees, beginning in the 2030s or 2040s. The shortfalls would eventually require the federal government to fund Social Security and Medicare by tax increases, benefit cuts, or a combination of both.

Paying for entitlements was a genuine challenge, but hardly an urgent crisis. Why, then, was Washington abuzz with talk of the alleged danger of entitlement shortfalls in the 1990s and 2000s? The deficit hawks claimed that foreign investors would conclude that the United States was a bad credit risk and would stop buying U.S. Treasury bonds, sending interest rates sky high as the United States, like some bankrupt Third World country, desperately sought foreign capital to roll over its national debt. Deficit doves pointed out that the United States would almost certainly continue to be a safe haven for nervous capital. What is more, governments have ways to manage large debts and deficits other than

high taxes or painful spending cuts, including “financial repression”—the use of moderate long-term inflation to burn down the national debt, a trick the United States used to shrink its World War II debt between the 1940s and the 1970s.

The most interesting participants in this debate were what might be called the “private debt hawks.” Richard Koo of the Nomura Research Institute coined the term “balance sheet recession” to describe economic crises caused by excessive buildups of private debt, a subject illuminated in recent years by the finance industry veteran and scholar Richard Vague. Private debt hawks warned that the next disastrous economic crisis was more likely to be caused by the excessive buildup of home mortgage debt and credit card debt in the 2000s than the anticipated shortfall of Social Security revenues in the 2030s. They were right. The deficit hawks were embarrassingly wrong.

Having witnessed these debates at close hand in Washington, D.C., in the 1990s and 2000s, I can testify that it was entirely possible to change one’s mind on all three questions as real-world evidence piled up. For example, I started off, like most people with backgrounds in the study of foreign policy, sharing the establishment’s presumption in favor of free trade—which seemed like a healthy and positive thing to favor. But the well-supported warnings of experts about mass offshoring of U.S. manufacturing to low-wage countries, and the well-documented threat of East Asian mercantilism to U.S. industry, persuaded me over time that the conventional case for free market globalization was wrong. In the case of foreign policy, I found the realists who warned against strategic overextension by post-Cold War America more convincing than either than the messianic imperialism of many neoconservatives or Buchanan-style isolationism, both of which seemed to disregard America’s national interests.

When it came to the federal deficit, I had no strong opinions either way. However, after being introduced by my prescient colleague Sherle Schweninger to the arguments of Richard Koo and others, I concluded in the early 2000s, by looking at the numbers, that those

“If you had a bullshit detector in the 1990s and 2000s and took it to events at Washington’s most prestigious think tanks, the alarm was constantly going off.”

who warned of the dangers of a private household debt buildup were much more persuasive than the deficit hawks who held that the United States faced an imminent crisis because of the long-term shortfall in Social Security revenues. There was nothing particularly sophisticated about any of these arguments, which required approximately the level of math required to make a household budget or do one’s taxes.

It was not the case, then, that well-informed people could disagree about these matters. On the contrary: You had to be willing to deny the obvious facts of East Asian economic nationalism and the ongoing, large-scale transfer by U.S. corporations of jobs to Mexican maquiladoras in order to believe the happy talk about how globalization would create an even larger number of well-paid jobs for factory workers in the “knowledge economy.” Similarly, even in the late 1990s, you had to be stubbornly blind to reality to believe that the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe would not risk provoking direct or indirect war with Russia—or to believe that invading Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein with the goal of “exporting democracy” would not create chaos in the country and the region. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the assertion of the deficit hawks that the U.S.

would soon have the creditworthiness of Argentina or Zimbabwe because of a minor Social Security shortfall scheduled for sometime in the 2030s was unconvincing as well. If you had a bullshit detector in the 1990s and 2000s and took it to events at the Council on Foreign Relations, the Aspen Institute, and Washington’s most prestigious think tanks, the alarm was constantly going off.

When an obviously misguided policy is adopted, and a more plausible policy is dismissed with a sneer, either the policymakers are remarkably stupid and ill-informed or else the outcome of the debate has been rigged to serve unacknowledged interests. Most adherents of the wrong ideas were intelligent, well-educated, and often well-tailored, so we must look to interests for an explanation.

Cui bono? Who benefited from the toxic nonsense that became the foundation of the post-Cold War American global order?

In the case of globalization, multinationals like Apple, automobile companies, retailers like Walmart, and the investment banks that backed these corporations or bought and sold them, all benefited from “global labor arbitrage”—replacing highly paid, often unionized workers in the United States with poorly paid workers with few or no labor or civil rights in Mexico, China, and other countries. Boosting corporate profit margins by slashing labor costs is much easier than skill-training your workforce and investing in innovative technology in order to increase per-worker productivity: Given a choice, companies tend to take the low road of replacing high-wage American labor with low-wage foreign labor, even if this means the loss of entire industries and supply chains. In 1998 Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric, said: “Ideally, you’d have every plant you own on a barge to move with currencies and changes in the economy.”

In the case of the global hegemony strategy eagerly adopted by both major parties after 9/11, there is no need for conspiracy theories: Ordinary bureaucratic politics explains the result. Involving the United States in foreign civil wars and regional conflicts that have no direct bearing on American national

security means bigger budgets for the Pentagon, State Department, CIA, and other agencies; more funding for defense contractors and NGOs with government contracts; more resources for academic security studies programs; more importance for members of Congress on military and foreign affairs committees and subcommittees; more celebrity and more book contracts for foreign affairs correspondents, and so on. Because the general public tends to defer to politicians on national security policy, it is inherently vulnerable to bureaucratic capture, in the same way that agriculture policy and infrastructure policymaking tend to be.

While globalization was championed by multinationals in search of cheap, nonunion labor, and the neoconservative project of quasi-imperial American global hegemony was largely driven by American national security bureaucracies and their contractors and political, journalistic, and academic allies, the deficit-hawk hysteria had a narrower though important constituency: Wall Street. If Americans could be persuaded that, to avert national bankruptcy, Social Security had to be cut and largely replaced by private retirement savings plans, including tax-favored plans like 401(k)s and IRAs, then a flood of money would pour into the pockets of the fee-skimming managers of private mutual funds.

From the perspective of their backers, then, these policies, disastrous though they may have been for American society, made sense—because they were so profitable. While offshoring has scuttled whole industrial sectors in the United States, many CEOs—and shareholders—have bought lovely vacation homes with the proceeds. Hundreds of billions of dollars earmarked to fund social transformation in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya in fact went to paying for McMansions and luxury cars in the D.C. suburbs, along with pricey private school tuitions. George W. Bush's attempt to partly privatize Social Security, and Barack Obama's proposal to use inflation adjustments to cut Social Security benefits, were both defeated by public opposition. But diverting money from Social Security to private accounts would be so profitable for the money

management industry that it is probably only a matter of time before the hysterical shriek of the deficit hawk is heard once again in the land.

"It is difficult to get a man to understand something," Upton Sinclair observed, "when his salary depends upon his not understanding it." Between the late 1990s and the 2010s, it was prudent for Americans who wanted a career in public policy, politics, or prestige journalism in Washington and New York to pretend to be persuaded by illogical, unsupported, and often openly preposterous arguments, because those were the arguments of the bipartisan establishment. Sensing, perhaps, how weak their claims about American global hegemony, the globalized knowledge economy of the future, and the alleged looming crisis of Social Security were, the adherents of orthodoxy for the most part refused to debate at all, stigmatizing critics and skeptics as silly ignoramuses, or else as dangerous extremists beyond the pale of serious discourse.

High-handed, sweeping dismissals of those who disagreed with any part of the consensus became the hallmark of the establishment retainer and PR class, a sign of their intellectual and moral nobility and the corresponding unfitness of those who dared to question received wisdom—no matter how shoddy it appeared. If you wondered about the possible downsides of expanding NATO right up to the borders of post-Soviet Russia you were an "isolationist," even if you favored a U.S. global alliance system in other respects. If you pointed out that U.S. trading partners Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan cheated in various ways to help their exporters at the expense of America's, you were a "Buchananite protectionist" who failed to understand that the Smoot-Hawley tariffs passed by the U.S. Congress in 1930 had somehow caused World War II. If you suggested in the 2000s that excessive private debt might cause a global recession in the next few years, the other person might stare at you uncomprehendingly while thinking, *Is this an acceptable opinion? Will it hurt my career?* For two decades, at most of the "high-level" discussions with CEOs, think tankers, prestige journalists, K

Street lobbyists, and public officials I attended, no matter the ostensible topic, someone would say gravely, "I'm really worried about getting entitlement spending under control." At that point a shiver of approval would ripple through the hoity-toity crowd. *We think that, too!*

In each of these three cases, the policy adopted by the establishment inevitably collided with reality. It is no defense of Vladimir Putin's tyranny and murderous aggression to point out that realist critics of NATO expansion to Russia's borders like George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and John Mearsheimer were entirely correct to warn of the danger that it would lead to conflict with Russia. America's post-9/11 war in Afghanistan resulted in complete U.S. humiliation and the triumph of the Taliban, while the unnecessary invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the U.S. wars of regime change that followed have left Bashar Assad in power in Syria, while pulverizing post-Qaddafi Libya into anarchic fragments ruled by warlords and infested by jihadists. Globalization? Mexico is now one of the major auto parts producers of the world, while Detroit is a wasteland, in which some abandoned neighborhoods are literally reverting to wilderness.

Following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, various countries adopted policies of "lustration," requiring public exposure of former communist officials and sometimes their confessions. No similar process can be expected in the United States, where continuing to defend disastrously wrong decisions appears to be a precondition for keeping one's place at the bipartisan buffet table. Yet the same establishment figures who now lament the disintegration and radicalization of once-mainstream political parties, inveigh against popular mistrust of "experts," and blame America's social woes on "Russian disinformation" in fact need look no further than their own record of being wildly wrong on a series of big, world-shaping questions, to which better answers were available all along. ■

This article was originally published on May 16, 2022.

THE REST

→ **Food and fuel shortages** are poised to become two of this year's most difficult problems to solve as **runaway inflation and supply-chain breakdowns destabilize the production and distribution of diesel and grain worldwide.** A U.S. Department of Agriculture forecast on the 2022-2023 crop output estimated that the global wheat stock was at a six-year low. Take China out of the equation, due to its habit of stockpiling wheat, and the situation looks even more severe, with the global stock dropping to its all-time fourth-lowest level. Diesel prices have become so volatile that farmers are ordering the fuel they need to run their machines without knowing how much it will cost until it arrives, exacerbating the unpredictable production and distribution of wheat and other staple grains used in thousands of food products, while also increasing the already-inflated prices for food across the world.

→ Years of quiet cooperation between Moscow and Jerusalem were broken Friday **when Russia fired a surface-to-air missile at Israeli fighter jets carrying out raids inside Syria**—a first-of-its-kind incident that shows how Ukraine has pushed the two countries toward open belligerence. The missile was launched from an advanced S-300 anti-aircraft system at a team of Israeli F-16s conducting air strikes in the northwestern Syrian city of Masyaf. Russia officially provided the S-300s to the Syrian government in 2018, a few years after Moscow entered the war as the primary backer, along with Iran, of the Assad regime, a move that put Moscow directly on Israel's border backing one of its main regional enemies. Moscow and Jerusalem have maintained a fragile truce after instituting a deconfliction process in 2015, which allowed Israel to strike at certain targets inside Syria without having to worry about reprisals from Russian forces inside the country. The **terms of Israeli-Russian cooperation began to break down over the war in Ukraine.**

→ Andy Warhol's painting of Marilyn Monroe **sold for \$195 million** this week, becoming **the most expensive piece of 20th-century art ever sold** and further cementing the art market's role as a safe space for mega-wealthy investors to park their money. "Shot Sage Blue Marilyn," one of dozens of Marilyn Monroe prints that Warhol produced in his "factory" in the 1960s, is an iconic piece of American art—and also a great investment, as **returns on blue-chip artworks in the past 20 years have beaten out returns from the S&P 500 by 250%.** Those concerned about the financialization of art should remember that "making money is art"—or so thought Warhol, anyway.

→ There is a **"very, very high risk" of a U.S. recession:** That is the frank assessment of Lloyd Blankfein, the former CEO of Goldman Sachs and the company's current senior chair, who appeared on *Face the Nation* on Sunday to discuss the U.S. economy and his company's decision to cut its previous assessment for projected U.S. growth in 2023. China, meanwhile, is already seeing its economy stumbling. With its zero-COVID policy shuttering factories and drastically slowing production, **China reported a 11% decrease in retail sales** in April compared to the same time last year. The Chinese government is planning to spend more stimulus money to help offset the weakened economy, and hopes to end its mandated lockdown policy by June.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

What if the standard accounts of terrorism cannot explain the acts of radical violence being incubated in chaos-loving message boards online? What if the terrorists in these cases are only adopting the language of political struggle to enact the motivations of the arsonist or the suicide? If that's the case, then political radicalization may not be the best framework for understanding and dismantling the processes driving these attacks.

"I told myself that eventually I was going to kill myself to escape this fate. My race was doomed and there was nothing I could do about it," wrote the 18-year-old who killed 10 people at a supermarket in Buffalo. His manifesto reads like an elaborate suicide note written to an imagined community online and composed in imitation of previous manifestos written by other notable neofascist terrorists.

"I've only been lurking here for a year and half, yet what I've learned here is priceless. It's been an honour [sic]," wrote the 19-year-old who opened fire on the Chabad of Poway in California—exactly six months after another fever-brained racist opened fire on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg, killing 11 people. The honor described by the Poway shooter referred to his time on 8chan, where he had first encountered the "replacement ideology" and became steeped in the lore of other far-right terrorists like the shooters in Pittsburgh and Christchurch.

—Jacob Siegel

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Eitan Bernath Is on Top of the 'World'

After making a name for himself as a kitchen wunderkind on 'Chopped,' he built a huge following online. Now, at age 20, he's publishing his first cookbook. And, oh, by the way, all the recipes are kosher.

BY LEAH KOENIG

When Eitan Bernath was 12 years old, he started a folder on his computer to store recipes for his future cookbook. That might sound precocious, but he had reason to dream. Just one year earlier, he had competed on the first-ever kid-focused episode of the popular Food Network show *Chopped*. Bernath didn't win the competition, but the experience solidified his budding love for cooking and food media.

Late last month Bernath celebrated his 20th birthday, and this month, his debut cookbook, *Eitan Eats the World: New Comfort Classics to Cook Right Now*, was released. The book features globally inspired, eminently cookable comfort foods, from peanut-butter-and-jelly pancakes to beer-battered wild mushroom tacos to Turkish-style red lentil soup. And while the book is not focused on Jewish cuisine, it includes a solid handful of overtly Jewish recipes (like green shakshuka, sesame schnitzel, and chicken soup), which nod to Bernath's heritage.

Like everything Bernath does, *Eitan Eats the World* is shaped by his signature mix of boundless exuberance (it

is hard to imagine anyone being more hyped to make avocado toast), firm grasp on the culinary zeitgeist, and obsessive attention to detail. "I hired four people to cross-test all of the book's recipes," he said. "Four might have been a touch overkill, but I know there are going to be people who are skeptical of my age, so I wanted to make sure everything was as clean as possible." Some of those early recipes from Bernath's computer files even made it into the book, though he updated them to make sure they reflect his current cooking style.

For most food writers, authoring a cookbook is a career-defining pinnacle. That is true, too, for Bernath, who said *Eitan Eats the World* "feels like the culmination of my culinary journey thus far." And yet, the book is just one small part of a larger food media empire he is building.

As is true for many Gen Z stars, the vast majority of his career has been housed online. Shortly after his appearance on *Chopped*, Bernath started a food blog (which has since evolved into his personal website). In more recent years, he launched wildly successful Instagram and TikTok accounts (with 652,000 and 2.2 million followers, respectively), and a popular YouTube channel, where he posts cooking tutorials for fettuccine alfredo and homemade marshmallows, as well as videos of himself trying outlandish food experiments like cooking while blindfolded. More recently, after appearing on a segment on *The Drew Barrymore Show* and hitting it off with the

host, he was hired as a recurring culinary contributor.

Bernath grew up in a religiously observant family in Teaneck, New Jersey, and, from a very young age, found himself drawn to food. He was raised on a steady media diet of Food Network shows, of course, but also used food as a way to learn about the world. "I would obsessively watch documentaries about subcuisines in India or Mexico or Italy," he said. For his bar mitzvah party, he requested the caterer serve *lahmajun*, or Turkish meat flatbreads.

Many of the dishes he learned about were off-limits from a kosher perspective, but Bernath said the limitations helped fuel his creativity: "If I wanted to experience something I couldn't just go to a restaurant and try it, I had to make it myself." In his family's home kitchen, he could, say, recreate a cheeseburger using a plant-based patty, or make the South Asian dish chicken tikka masala by swapping out the yogurt traditionally used to marinate the meat for coconut-based yogurt.

As Bernath's career began to take off in his later teens, he shifted from filming videos in his family's kitchen to the garage, which his parents helped convert into a production set. "I was extremely privileged to have parents who were supportive of my dreams—way before anyone else was," he said. In early 2021, while most of his peers were studying for college exams, he left his parents' home for a temporary studio in Manhattan to focus on building his production company, Eitan Productions.

A few months later, buoyed by his runaway success, he moved himself and the company to a duplex penthouse (with an expansive kitchen) in Manhattan's Gramercy Park neighborhood. Eitan Productions recently hired its eighth employee, which means at 20 years old, Bernath is a first-time cookbook author



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and a full time CEO. “It has been a wild learning experience to do this at such a young age,” he said.

Bernath has deftly avoided being pigeonholed as a kosher cook. And yet, he displays his Jewish heritage proudly, whether that means filming a video of himself trying McDonald’s for the first time (in Israel, where the restaurant is kosher-certified), joining the food council for the food rescue organization City Harvest as an act of *tzedakah*,

or wearing a Star of David necklace for a cooking segment on *The Drew Barrymore Show*. “For a lot of people who follow me, I might be the only Jew they follow,” he said. “So I feel a great sense of responsibility—particularly during this moment when antisemitism is on the rise.”

You have to squint a little to see it, but all of the recipes in *Eitan Eats the World* are kosher-friendly. He included a recipe for that dairy-free chicken tikka

masala, along with a mushroom-based riff on a classic Philly cheesesteak, and *queso fundido* where plant-based protein substitutes for the chorizo. “My kosher readers will notice, but most other readers might not,” he said. For Bernath, as long as his work means people are getting more comfortable in their kitchens, it’s all gravy. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

EEAAO!!!!

The best movie of the year is a spectacular, multilevel meditation on what it means to be Jewish, or any other kind of human

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

There may be, in some other corner of the multiverse, a Liel Leibovitz who could actually write a coherent and elegant review of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. He’s probably a few pounds lighter, knows its wise to call it quits after three martinis, and possesses the sort of elan needed to succinctly capture a film that begins as an airless drama about the Wangs, a family of Chinese American immigrants living above a laundromat, and very quickly takes a turn into a metaphysical acid trip about the choices we don’t make and the alternate, parallel universes they generate.

That Liel Leibovitz, the smarter one, would probably kick off his piece with a plot summary that doesn’t give away too many of the film’s most delicious gags, like the fact that part of it involves a reality in which human beings have hot dogs for fingers and play the piano with their feet. He would simply say that the movie begins with the Wangs facing a potentially ruinous IRS audit, because Evelyn (Michelle

Yeoh, sublime) claimed her very loopy hobby as a tax-deductible expense; that her husband, Waymond (Ke Huy Quan, the second coming of Chaplin), is filing for divorce; that her daughter, Joy (Stephanie Hsu, a joy indeed), is gay and hurting and resentful of her mother; that her father, Gong Gong (James Hong, showing why he deserves the Walk of Fame star he received earlier this month), is cold and uncaring; and that the tax agent haunting her is cruel and named Deirdre Beaubeirdra and is played to absolute perfection by the amazing Jamie Lee Curtis.

Multiverse Liel would then report that, about 10 minutes in, as the Wangs struggle to keep their small business from filing for bankruptcy, Waymond twitches his head and announces to Evelyn that he is not her husband but a man called Alpha Waymond, sent from the Alphaverse to warn her of a grave danger. That danger is Jobu Tupaki, a creature who was once Joy Wang but who learned how to verse-jump and has now become all powerful and wishes to destroy all existence by sucking it into a black hole in the center of a giant

everything bagel. In the Other Liel’s more talented telling, it would have all made sense.

But as we, sadly, have only one universe in which to search for meaning, I’ll just say that there are only two things you should know about *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, hereafter EEAAO, now available to stream on an overpriced digital platform of your choice. The first is that there’s a reason why the movie’s a smash hit, bringing in the best per-theater box-office average since the new Spider-Man and ousted only by that other Marvel menace, Dr. Strange: It’s a work of sheer, unbridled, exuberant, lovingly chaotic and utterly pleasurable cinematic genius. Imagine the Coen brothers, Jackie Chan, Ridley Scott, and Pauly Shore getting together to make a movie and you may begin to get a feeling for the experience that awaits.

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The second thing you should know about EEAAO is that it's arguably the most insightful bit of commentary in any medium about our spiritual plight at this moment in time.

Which brings us back to that knot-ty plot.

The idea behind the movie is simple: Every time we make a decision—whom to marry, what to study, even what to eat for lunch—a separate but equal reality unfurls, one dedicated to what might've happened had we chosen differently. The multiverse, then, is simply the sum total of all of our what-ifs. Some are plausible and heartbreaking: In EEAAO, Evelyn connects with a version of herself that refused Waymond's marriage proposal, became a big-time martial arts movie star, and enjoyed all the fame and fortune but none of the love of one good man. And some are funny and head-scratching, like a parallel universe in which Evelyn and Joy are both rocks, standing perfectly still and silent at the edge of a precipice, exchanging a halting dialogue in captions as they contemplate immovable eternity. But all corners of the multiverse are united by one foundational sorrow, the unbearable burden of going through life always questioning whether you're doing the right thing, for yourself and for those you love.

Who among us hasn't felt this crushing weight? We have life coaches and divorce lawyers and Peloton instructors and a whole battalion of professionals dedicated to making us pay for a sliver of reassurance, or, at least, for an abeyance of the anxiety that we are royally fucking up. The Evelyn in the beginning of the movie is in trouble because there are so many other things she'd rather be—a singer, an actor, a chef, a better daughter, a kinder mother, someone else's wife. And the Joy who eventually becomes the dreaded Jobu Tupaki grows monstrous because, having experienced every conceivable permutation of herself, she realizes that having it all is exactly the same as having nothing at all. Perfection is just another form of nihilism, and once you've achieved it you may as well dream up a literal everything bagel—that is, a bagel topped with literally everything that exists

“All corners of the multiverse are united by one foundational sorrow, the unbearable burden of going through life always questioning whether you're doing the right thing.”

here on Earth—and suck life itself into its cavity.

Both mother and daughter, in other words, display the sort of existential ennui that the species had experienced from its earliest days of hind-leg walking. No sooner had he stood upright than early man realized that being is a combinatorial pursuit, a series of interchangeable ands, ors, and nots that allow for nearly infinite sequences leading to nearly infinite outcomes.

And because no human being can function while constantly trying to calculate and evaluate the end result of any given action amid a multitude of might-have-beens, man fell back on religion, which is the process of injecting order and delivering relief by eliminating possibilities. To believe something is, by default, to accept that its opposite, at least, isn't true. To practice faith is to do away with a set of behaviors that are otherwise available, even enticing: As an observant Jew, to give just one small but significant example, oysters are no longer a choice for me.

The Wangs understand this perfectly, and this is the pure power of EEAAO,

the emotional force that turns it from a mere fun romp to a profoundly powerful meditation on being human. It's not the spectacular fight scenes that deliver victory over evil; it's understanding that family, and tradition, and the love and reverence we have for those mutually supporting, intensely human institutions are our engines of survival, as individuals and as a collective.

When the film begins, Joy and Waymond and Gong Gong and Evelyn and even Deirdre Beaubiedra imagine happiness as only perfect creatures of the Enlightenment would, which is to say as a solitary, even solipsistic endeavor that likely comes at the expense of someone else's well-being. Each sees the other as a hurdle to jump over, not a shoulder to lean on. Which is why they're all so miserable.

It's only fitting that so much of the film takes place inside an IRS building: Modern life, EEAAO tells us with a wink—the promise of absolute personal freedom from obligation and the license to do as you please—is dying with the whimper of a million tax liabilities. If you want to survive, start a family and sacrifice for it, respect your elders, celebrate your festivals, be a good neighbor, practice kindness—in short, do all the things that you heard your rabbi tell you to do before deciding that shul had little to teach a progressive and sophisticated little smartie like you.

Because that reality in which you can be happy? The one where you don't second-guess every decision you make, the one where you experience real hurt but also real love and real hope, the one where you forgive others and, much more importantly, forgive yourself? Mazal tov—you're already living in it. ■

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