

# THE TAB

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## NEWS

# Silicon Valley's Civil War

Tech's leadership is splitting into two elites—and the battle between them will shape America's future

BY NADIA ASPAROUHOVA

**W**ith an estimated net worth of over \$1 billion, Marc Andreessen, co-founder of the Netscape browser and venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, is far from an everyman. And yet Andreessen's biting criticisms of the "entrenched oligarchic structure of the present regime" have made him one of the surprising figureheads of a growing anti-elite movement that could—depending on which side wins out—reshape America's political and social future.

Andreessen is one of the more prominent names in a new class of tech wealth that includes figures like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel whose political vision and methods conflict both with dot-com tech titans like Bill Gates and Pierre Omidyar, as well as with those of old world industry and media, like Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner. While it might seem strange, given his own position of power, for someone like Andreessen to criticize elites, the truth is that elites have cliques, just like the rest of us. And in the cafeteria of America's billionaires, Andreessen and his peers are hurling food and spoiling for a fight,

while the incumbents are calling in favors at the State Department and *New York Times*.

Of course, neither camp is driven solely by high-minded ideals, but both maintain fundamentally irreconcilable views of the kind of country they want to build. While Reid Hoffman and Pierre Omidyar, respectively, founders of LinkedIn and eBay, pledged \$27 million to help artificial intelligence "vindicate social values of fairness ... and justice," Andreessen publicly laments the ill effects of training artificial intelligence on the "woke mind virus." Marc Benioff's company, Salesforce, announced last year that they would tie executive pay to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives, which Andreessen has sharply criticized.

While these disagreements may look like a contest between conservatives and liberals, the reality is not that simple. Garry Tan, a successful investor who is now the president and CEO of famed startup incubator Y Combinator, has been a vocal critic of San Francisco's progressive politics in recent years, while affirming that he has "always been and likely will always be a Democrat." He and Andreessen, like others, appear to believe instead that this disagreement

is centered around the embrace or rejection of a certain set of principles—uncovering and amplifying the best talent, valuing meritocracy over credentialism, fixing problems by circumventing institutions, and thinking from first principles—which underpin the tech industry’s runaway success.

Both camps also believe that the other team is the root of the country’s (and maybe the world’s) problems. It’s a fight worth watching, and understanding, because its outcome will have long-term implications for all of us.

From the late 1990s through the late 2010s, the dominant American elite was represented by what political scientist Samuel P. Huntington once called the “Davos Man”—a reference to the Swiss resort town where the World Economic Forum (WEF) holds its annual conclave of elites—who believe that an interconnected global citizenship is the key to humanity’s future. Their worldview relates to the way they made their wealth, starting with an investment banking boom that was driven by decreased regulation and technical advances in computing in the 1970s and 1980s, combined with the birth of the internet. Today it is dominated by executives in finance and management consulting, who mingle with early tech pioneers, academics, and NGO executives.

The Davos elite view the improvement of society as a management consulting problem, like estimating the number of pingpong balls in South American coastal resorts or mapping out the supply chain issues of the Fortune 100, which is precisely what made them successful in the business world. It’s marked by trends such as social entrepreneurship, impact investing, triple bottom line, and ESG, lauded for their professionalized ways of improving the world while (or by) making it more efficient.

This philosophy was accelerated by developments taking place in the late 20th century, when digital technology made global commerce and communication even easier to realize, and liberal democracy’s triumph over Soviet communism was thought to mark the end of grand geopolitical wars. The institutions

birthed in that era reflected this view of the world: the Clinton Foundation, with its vision of global interdependence; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which focused on global health and reducing extreme poverty; George Soros’ Open Society Foundations, chiefly concerned with spreading democracy throughout the world. Certainly, these organizations have achieved some laudable accomplishments. The Gates Foundation, for example, single-handedly revived the field of malaria research and helped vaccinate millions of people from measles and tuberculosis.

By focusing on global issues, however, America’s Davos elite let its attention drift from the homeland. Because they came of age in the internet and global commerce era, they primarily identify as citizens of the world, rather than any one nation-state. *The New York Times* called this group “new globalists” as far back as 1972, noting their belief that “multinational business is creating the basis for peace and a new world order.” The collective power of these multinational corporations and nonprofits seemed to supersede American hegemony. A wave of global associations formed to consolidate and amplify this denationalized power, including the World Economic Forum, the Business Roundtable and the Trilateral Commission.

In the late 1990s, the internet—and the data it contains—became a primary “resource” for this new, stateless society to control. Under the stewardship of the Davos elite, the American federal government, instead of being made to serve its own people, was repurposed as a globalized tool to manage and secure stores of data. In the mid-2010s, just prior to the tech backlash, FBI Director James Comey pushed aggressively for Congress to mandate the inclusion of so-called “backdoors” in the products of tech companies like Apple and Google, which would be used by federal surveillance agencies. Apple vigorously pushed back on this request, stating in a public letter that backdoors would “undermine the very freedoms and liberty our government is meant to protect,” and affirming that their dissent came from “the deepest respect for American democracy and a love of our country.”

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## COMMUNITY

Our shared Jewish life, at [tabletmag.com/sections/community](https://tabletmag.com/sections/community)

True American values—entrepreneurialism, liberty, meritocracy, ambition—were minimized or discouraged by the Davos elite. In a 2016 essay that is no longer published on the WEF’s website, Ida Auken, a Danish politician and WEF member, penned “Welcome to 2030,” a speculative vision of the future. “I own nothing, have no privacy, and life has never been better,” Auken wrote, depicting a dystopia that defies parody. “Once in awhile I get annoyed about the fact that I have no real privacy. Nowhere I can go and not be registered [but] all in all, it is a good life. Much better than the path we were on, where it became so clear that we could not continue with the same model of growth.”

The Davos elite sees a more connected world as the highest form of society. This notion of “connectedness,” initially conjuring a vision of people that can overcome their differences and work peaceably together, began to glitch and take on a more sinister tone in recent years. “Connectedness” now conjures up images of a society in which each person can be measured, tracked, and analyzed. Klaus Schwab, the World Economic Forum’s founder and executive chairman, has publicly embraced this vision as “Globalization 4.0,” which entails the use of artificial intelligence and data surveillance to bind the world together and place people across the globe even more fully under the watchful authority of those who control the data.

In seeking to control the internet as a resource, the United States’ ruling class hamstrung what had been an extraordinary tool for creativity and exploration. It is this spirit of creativity and exploration that Andreessen and his peers seek to preserve. Andreessen joins a rising set of counterelites who view unconstrained individual *ambition* as the key to human flourishing, admonishing the “smug complacency” that characterizes today’s elites, as Andreessen once put it, and lamenting the lack of vision across the public sector. Housing, for example, is difficult to build in cities with strong economic potential, Andreessen argues, and “the last major innovation in K-12 education was Montessori, which traces back to the 1960s.” The counterelites believe they can use their vast resources

to take the difficult moonshots that no one else can or will attempt, with widespread benefits to humanity if they succeed.

After finance, tech is now the second-most-common industry represented among the world’s billionaires, and is by far the best-capitalized: tech billionaires’ collective net worth—\$2.5 trillion, by *Forbes’* 2021 estimate—is now nearly double that of those who made their wealth in fashion or finance. California is home to the most billionaires in the country, half of whom made their fortunes in Silicon Valley.

But while the tech industry has now taken its place at the head of America’s elite institutions, it began with a mission to disrupt old patterns of business, captured by Facebook’s early motto: “Move fast and break things.” Those who came up in tech in the late 2000s and 2010s spent their early careers building apps at hackathons instead of worrying about advanced degrees. While waiting for their code to compile, they skimmed Hacker News, not *The New York Times*. Conversation and debate between these figures happened on Twitter, blogs, and Substack, not mainstream media networks. Their views on society came from reading the writings of Scott Alexander or Paul Graham, rather than college assignments or think tank policy briefs.

In this environment, founders routinely turned down high-paying jobs at management consulting firms and hedge funds in order to start fledgling businesses with uncertain outcomes. This fostered a new set of cultural values and myths that rival the ones upheld by older elite institutions. In the new ethos of Silicon Valley, talent matters more than credentials. The individual is prized as the fulcrum of social change—a truly talented and ambitious person can accomplish just about anything, so long as they aren’t impeded by obtuse regulations.

After wealth began to gush like oil from the fertile grounds of San Francisco, some founders sought to shed their image as disruptors and join the world of respectable elites. It is a familiar story in America: Entrants to the new money club who, rather than lord

it over older groups of elites, try to buy their way into the prestigious, old money world. Marc Benioff, for example, the co-founder and CEO of the software company Salesforce, is on the World Economic Forum’s board of trustees. Slack co-founder Stewart Butterfield and his wife, Away co-founder Jen Rubio, donated \$25 million to UNICEF during the COVID-19 pandemic. Box co-founder Aaron Levie sponsors and attends charity galas with his wife, Jollee Emerson, who is the co-founder of DEI solutions provider Paradigm. Levie has stated that he shares Benioff’s interest in the intersection between philanthropy and profit—a concept that originated with, and is heavily promoted by, the Davos elite.

While all these founders made their money in tech, their public role is now fundamentally indistinguishable from the elites that came before them. Even the most commonly cited example of tech-flavored philanthropy—effective altruism, or EA, a philanthropic movement that emphasizes efficiency and measurement—merely optimizes charitable giving rather than attempting to rewrite the system itself. Despite its adjacency to tech, EA is genetically closer to the philanthropic view of Gates- and Buffett-style giving, as it shares their preoccupation with global cause prioritization and an algorithmic approach to problem solving.

Others in tech, however, like Andreessen or PayPal founder Peter Thiel, view their professional success as validation that they know a better way of tackling humanity’s biggest challenges. Rather than seeing tech as a means to an end—no different from making money in finance or real estate—this group sees tech’s true innovation as a fresh system of values capable of accelerating progress and improving society, which could be applied beyond a business context.

The Thiel Fellowship was one of the earliest endeavors in this vein, a program launched in 2011 that gives young people \$100,000 to drop out of college and work on their own ideas. Its alumni have generated billions of dollars in value and, perhaps more importantly, paved a new, respectable path for those who favor impact over Ivy League credentials.

For the counterelite, the founder archetype—a single individual with unconstrained ambition—is uniquely and characteristically American. Founders benefit from network effects, or a concentration of talent in one place, and that means America takes on central importance for the counterelite as a beacon to attract the world’s best and brightest. Katherine Boyle, who launched Andreessen Horowitz’s American Dynamism initiative last year, stated in her manifesto that the tech sector can be used to rebuild the public institutions “that we used to trust, especially those in the realm of government.” Her position presents a clear reversal of the Davos worldview, which de-emphasizes nationalist policy in favor of globalism.

The pandemic offered tech’s true believers an opportunity to experiment with putting these values into practice. Stripe co-founder Patrick Collison, for example, along with biology researcher Patrick Hsu and economist and blogger Tyler Cowen, started a grant program called Fast Grants after learning that scientists were “stuck on hold” waiting for federal funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). They raised more than \$50 million for COVID-related research and distributed it at lightning speed, organizing a panel that reviewed researchers’ applications and awarded funding in less than a week.

Ryan Petersen—founder of Flexport, a supply chain logistics software platform—rented a boat and toured the Port of Long Beach in October 2021 in order to study the pandemic-induced supply chain crisis first hand. At 6 a.m., Petersen published a Twitter thread that chronicled what he learned—noticing, for example, that zoning laws prevented stacking containers more than two high, leading to backups. The thread went viral and by 3 p.m. that same day, Long Beach had temporarily changed its zoning laws in response to his recommendations. Petersen was not a tech celebrity with a mainstream media presence; he did not donate to electoral campaigns or employ a lobbyist to accomplish his goals. Instead, he leveraged deep expertise, a “first principles” approach, and a

**“In the new ethos of Silicon Valley, a truly talented and ambitious person can accomplish just about anything, so long as they aren’t impeded by obtuse regulations.”**

social media platform to make his desired impact.

At the start of the pandemic, tech was the first among laymen to realize that the virus’s spread would follow an exponential growth curve, which they were accustomed to spotting in the growth trajectories of startups. “What if this coronavirus is the pandemic that public health people have been warning about for years?” tweeted Balaji Srinivasan, the entrepreneur and investor who co-founded Counsyl, a genetics testing company, and taught bioinformatics at Stanford. “It would accelerate many pre-existing trends,” he continued, rattling off a list of possibilities that now feel like bitter memories: border closures, nationalism, social isolation, preppers, remote work, face masks, distrust in governments. His tweet was published on Jan. 30, 2020.

Popular media outlets were not impressed by tech’s fears. “Don’t Worry About the Coronavirus. Worry About the Flu,” proclaimed one BuzzFeed article, whose author cited statements from the Centers for Disease Control that COVID-19 posed a low risk to the American public, then fretted over the “onslaught of sensational disinformation” on social media platforms. Vox published a mocking article on Feb. 13, 2020, titled “‘No handshakes, please’:

The tech industry is terrified of the coronavirus”; the headline refers to a sign that was posted on Andreessen Horowitz’s office doors.

Despite the media’s bemusement, the San Francisco Bay Area was the first region in the United States to issue a stay-at-home order, and California was the first state to enact a statewide shelter-in-place order. Tech companies like Twitter, Google, and Facebook were some of the first employers to enact work-from-home policies, starting in early March. At first, it seemed that tech was united, aligned in its intuitions against the default way of thinking.

But as the rest of the country joined the panic, stay-at-home orders and mask mandates—initially celebrated within tech—turned into symbols of unyielding institutionalism. Tech split into two camps, mirroring the schism between its elites: There were those who continued to defer to public health authorities and uphold the mandates for as long as they were told, and those who were disillusioned by the CDC’s lack of leadership, preferring instead to use their own judgment.

The CDC’s poor pandemic response had demonstrated that institutions were incapable of dealing with a genuine crisis, but could tech step up and build something new? While more people now shared the counterelite’s position that our current institutions could not be relied upon to manage our most pressing social needs, any optimism about better alternatives was tempered by the prevailing lukewarm sentiment toward tech. Many were still distrustful of tech’s ability to build things that improved, rather than harmed, humanity.

#### More Pieces on Silicon Valley

While the pandemic brought these concerns to the foreground, tech skepticism started brewing as far back as 2008, as global elites watched with a mix of curiosity and apprehension as Mark Zuckerberg, once an awkward college student, became the world’s youngest self-made billionaire at the age of 23.

Zuckerberg wanted to do things a little differently from the elites, but he quickly made himself unpopular among his peers—a loner in the billionaire’s cafeteria. He started off traditionally enough,

with a \$100 million gift to the Newark, New Jersey's public school system and a signature to The Giving Pledge, the in-group social contract created by Gates and Buffett in 2010. But his Newark initiative failed to produce memorable results, and in 2015, when he launched his first major philanthropic initiative under his own name—the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI)—he followed in the steps of Emerson Collective, the philanthropic initiative founded by Steve Jobs' wife, Laurene Powell Jobs, and structured it as an LLC instead of a 501(c)(3). This meant, among other things, that CZI would not be legally bound by the same accountability requirements as other foundations, and could invest in for- and non-profits, which caused a stir in the media and within the philanthropy sector.

In early 2017, following the 2016 presidential election that rattled the Democratic Party, Zuckerberg conducted a “national tour” of America, riding tractors and shaking hands and leading many to speculate upon his political ambitions. But Zuckerberg controlled Facebook, and Facebook controlled the internet, and the elites had decided that Zuckerberg could no longer be trusted to act in their party's interest. Shortly after concluding his tour, Zuckerberg became mired in an onslaught of accusations by politicians and media outlets that the Russian government, among others, had used Facebook to influence the outcome of the presidential elections, destroying the popularity he had previously enjoyed. The following year, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* broke a story about Facebook allowing a third party, Cambridge Analytica, to collect data about its users without their consent.

These scandals, along with Twitter's prominent role in the presidential election campaign, inaugurated the tech backlash, and the deliberate seeding of public distrust of tech more broadly. The elite's greatest fear was not misinformation, foreign interference, or “toxic” social media, as they proclaimed, but a rising wealth class with a competing vision for the world. This fear was compounded by prior failed attempts to gain surveillance access to tech companies'

“The elite's greatest fear was not misinformation, foreign interference, or ‘toxic’ social media, but a rising wealth class with a competing vision for the world.”

data in the years leading up to the backlash. If they couldn't assume control of tech through legal due process, they'd have to take it by force.

Those in tech were caught wholly off-guard by the turn in public sentiment. Until then, tech had enjoyed an extremely favorable relationship with the government, academia, and media. In an interview with *The Verge* two days after the November 2016 election, Zuckerberg confidently stated that, “Personally, I think the idea that fake news on Facebook ... influenced the election in any way—I think is a pretty crazy idea.” To make such a statement in the wake of the election suggests that Zuckerberg had expected to be treated the way Facebook had always been treated: as a media darling. When that didn't happen, Zuckerberg and many other tech executives got into a defensive position, concerned solely with fending off the blows.

Tech was at a crossroads. On one side were those who believed the media narrative that tech had caused a lot of problems in the world, and felt remorseful and ashamed of their work. On the other were those who maintained that tech and its values were uniquely positioned to improve the world, and refused to apologize. At best, they felt misunderstood; at worst, they saw the backlash as an attack from outsiders who didn't

understand how tech worked. This latter group formed the beginnings of the counterelite.

Mindful of the public flaying that Zuckerberg has received, members of the counterelite have avoided becoming collateral damage by rejecting mainstream media coverage. Brian Armstrong, for instance, who co-founded Coinbase, has loudly advocated for “every tech company [to] go direct[ly] to their audience, and become a media company,” once even using the publishing platform Medium to preempt an anticipated *New York Times* hit piece about Coinbase. Zuckerberg himself has now emulated this strategy, refusing to grant an interview to any mainstream media outlet after announcing that Facebook would be renamed Meta, instead sitting down with independent creators like Ben Thompson, who writes the business newsletter *Stratechery*.

Unlike previous generations, the counterelite isn't rushing to start charitable (tax-advantaged) foundations in their name or make large donations to universities. Because the counterelite views individuals, not institutions, as the primary agent of change, they are more concerned with circumventing institutions than building them. Yet this individualist mindset will only take the counterelite so far if in fact they want to be public stewards rather than ambassadors of yet another industry town, like entertainment in Los Angeles, politics in Washington, D.C., or academia in Boston.

Tech is still afraid of the nuance and compromises that are required to interact with the outside world, and given how they've been mischaracterized by press and politicians, that fear is not unjustified. But this is a rite of passage which every wealth generation must navigate. The Davos elite were not immune to public criticism in their heyday, either. They, too, went through the hazing ritual of a public fallout in response to the 2008 bank bailouts and excessive displays of wealth, leading to the Occupy Wall Street movement several years later.

The Davos cohort eventually learned how to embed itself within every cultural sector. The counterelite, by

contrast—who cannot muster the courage to call themselves elites—remains reluctant to don a suit and emerge from their reclusive hiding place behind a screen.

At the start of the pandemic, Andreessen published a manifesto, “It’s Time to Build,” on his venture capital firm’s blog. A critique of the institutional response to COVID-19, the essay urged tech to build the world they wanted to see. Yet some of the

shortcomings he cites, such as the lack of a COVID-19 vaccine, were not due to a lack of building, as we now know. And the problem, it has become clear, wasn’t only an inability to build new things, but the refusal to get one’s hands dirty defending the viable heritage of the past. “Tech people didn’t participate in government,” Mike Solana, who writes *Pirate Wires*, the technology newsletter, once said in an interview. “They abdicated that responsibility and in its

place came horrific policy that crippled the entire region.”

For the counterelite to live up to its own loftiest visions of individualism, progress, and the unfettered pursuit of opportunity, they will need to be judged by what they build that is of lasting benefit—not just for themselves, but for the entire country. ■

*This article was originally published on May 14, 2023.*

NEWS

# Urban Progressivism’s National Tour Crashes in Philadelphia

With crime spiraling in big cities, Philly voters chose a law-and-order candidate in Tuesday’s Democratic primary

BY SEAN COOPER

No matter who won Tuesday night’s Democratic primary in the Philadelphia mayor’s race—with the victor all but assured to ascend to City Hall, as Democrats have won every general election in the city going back to the 1950s—the single most important issue for voters was the intertwined gun and drug epidemics. Street shootings and overdoses, not to mention a recent surge in carjackings, have trickled into even Philadelphia’s toniest neighborhoods, engendering a collective fear about public safety that harked back to the rampant violence of the early 1990s that many had assumed the city had left behind.

Well before the sun had risen on Wednesday morning, the race was called for longtime political powerhouse and former City Council member Cherelle

Parker, who secured the win with a campaign built upon her promise to add 300 new hires to a police department that, under her tenure, would deploy the legal application of stop-and-frisk in an effort to crack down on gun violence. Notching the Democratic nomination with about a third of the vote total, Parker was the establishment candidate, backed by a roster of local elected officials and propelled by a base of Black voters and those living in some of the neighborhoods that have suffered the most from gun violence and the drug epidemic. With Parker now set to square off in the general election against David Oh, the Republican who took the nomination uncontested, she’s poised to become the city’s first ever female leader.

By Election Day, the field of nine Democratic candidates seeking to replace the term-limited Mayor Jim Kenney had seen their public safety plans

extensively prodded on the campaign trail. Hardly a debate went by without questions from voters about how the candidates would tame the gun violence that had claimed 1,500 lives in Philadelphia since 2020. Among the city’s voters, 89% reported that crime was their top priority in the election, according to Pew. Among Black voters, 93% reported crime as their top priority.

Yet, with the race remaining relatively close until its final hours, as five Democratic front-runners vied for the nomination, there was a sharp political line drawn between Parker, the only Black woman candidate and a native of north-west Philadelphia, and Helen Gym, an Asian American former school teacher originally from Columbus, Ohio.

While Parker positioned herself as a moderate whose policy proposals reflected her community’s demands to restore order in the city, Gym, the candidate of urban progressivism, was sharply critical of the idea that policing is the best tool to reduce violence, instead pushing for social justice policies to address what she said were the root causes of crime.

It was that approach that earned Gym, a former at-large council member in Philadelphia, the endorsements of blockbuster national progressive figures like Sen. Bernie Sanders, Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, and Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the powerful union whose donation to Gym’s campaign helped it lead the pack with the largest share of donors from outside the Philadelphia region.

With \$31 million spent, this was by far the most expensive race in Philadelphia's history. Part of that was due to the big bucks poured in by the candidates themselves, including \$10 million alone from real estate mogul Allan Domb, who ran on a pro-business and tough-on-crime ticket. But significant money and political capital came from outside interests who saw major stakes in the race for City Hall. On Sunday, Helen Gym hosted both Bernie and AOC at a rally. This marked the most recent push by leading national progressives to build a revamped coalition anchored by major U.S. cities, where crime and drugs have become overwhelming concerns for voters.

In the mayor's race last month in Chicago, relative political newcomer Brandon Johnson leveraged his Bernie endorsement to shock the city's establishment and beat Paul Vallas, who'd run a campaign promising to bulk up a police force that, while already one of the nation's largest, has failed to tame the city's rampant gun violence. That contest came on the heels of two progressive victories: City Councilor Michelle Wu's win in the Boston mayoral contest with the support of Sen. Elizabeth Warren and a cast of leading Massachusetts progressives, and Rep. Karen Bass' win in the Los Angeles mayoral race. Though some progressives bristled at Bass' campaign promise to hire 200 more LAPD officers rather than "reform an irredeemable department," as one grassroots coalition put it, her win in LA was what AOC touted on Sunday, in front of some 1,000 Helen Gym supporters.

"We're taking this fight from the West Coast to the East Coast. ... We started in Los Angeles with Karen Bass winning [as] mayor, who also went up against a billionaire trying to win an election," AOC said, a reference to Philadelphia-area conservative billionaire Jeffrey Yass who'd funded a slew of attack ads on Gym in recent weeks. "Then, we went to Chicago, same thing. The money and institutions blanketed the air waves, but you know what the people of Chicago did? The teachers got together, schools got together, hospitals got together, and

"Hardly a debate went by without questions from voters about how the candidates would tame the gun violence that had claimed 1,500 lives in Philadelphia since 2020."

they said nope, Brandon Johnson for mayor." Dozens of phones around the floor of the dark, cavernous venue shot video of AOC's speech, just as those up around the bar area on the second level snapped pics of her in her sharp, all-white outfit.

Organizers had billed the event as dual purpose, with big screen TVs broadcasting the 76ers attempt to overtake the Boston Celtics in game 7 of the NBA Eastern Semi-Finals. Even with the formidable shooting power of James Harden and regular season MVP Joel Embiid, the 76ers were collapsing under the weight of so much expectation of what their marquee players could do. By the time AOC started to extoll Gym's plan to reverse Philadelphia's historic levels of violence, one of the few mentions by a host of speakers who largely glossed over the issue, the Sixers season was over, routed in a 112-88 blowout. So much for star power.

"She knows what keeps us safe," AOC said. "Her public safety plan is focused on investing in wrap-around programming so people are supported through the hardest times in their lives. And by the way, Helen is also running on a Green New Deal for schools. But once again, they've got money, but we've got the people."

No one there would have expected an

extensive policy proposal in a setting like this, but it was telling that AOC's mention of public safety had little to say about law enforcement, or the human toll of street violence, or the rampant straw gun purchases driving so much of the city's violence. Rather, the progressive standard bearer touted the city's anti-violence initiatives—apparently unaware that the programs resulted in "millions of dollars left unspent and thousands of dollars unaccounted for," as an investigation by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* concluded.

With Bernie set as the evening's closer, Gym took to the podium with rows of supporters waving campaign posters behind her. "The eyes of the nation are on us today," she said. "And we are going to make history."

Promising voters a "community safety agenda that ensures everyone in Philadelphia is safe and feels safe ... and swiftly responds to violence and works to stop it from occurring in the first place," Gym said that "a mayor has to prevent crime, not just respond to it." But before she could expand any further on how she would do that, she was onto the environmental plank of her agenda. "And we are going to deliver, as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said, a Green New Deal for this city that takes on the climate crisis



## UPCOMING HOLIDAY

### Shavuot

The day the Israelites got the Torah



[tabletmag.com/sections/holidays/shavuot](https://tabletmag.com/sections/holidays/shavuot)

and environmental racism that has held too many communities back.”

Bernie, who seemed to be the draw for so many in attendance, ran through what sounded like a stump speech that might have been used at rallies in Los Angeles or Chicago. “I’m here to tell you what you already know,” he said. “Helen is bringing us together, Black and white, and Latino, Asian American, Native American, gay and straight, young and old. All of us coming together in the fight for justice. That’s the kind of leadership America needs. It’s the kind of leadership Philadelphia needs. And

I’m here tonight because I see in Helen a kindred spirit.”

In the end, the voters in the neighborhoods least affected by the gun violence and the drug epidemic formed Gym’s largest support block, despite her campaign being widely touted for a “cultlike following” of canvassers driving support on the ground. For those voting in precincts that had suffered at least 175 shootings in their area since 2015, half cast their ballot for Parker. Only 17% of that same group supported Gym. And with the gun violence so densely concentrated in the city’s least

affluent communities, it perhaps wasn’t a surprise to see 53% of voters who make less than \$50,000 coming out for Parker’s definitive, tough-on-crime platform. Among that same income bracket, only 12% stood with Gym.

In a tragic nod to the reality of Philadelphia’s gun violence, two weeks before the election a canvasser for one pro-Gym group shot and killed another campaign worker in a dispute while knocking on doors. ■

*This article was originally published on May 17, 2023.*

## COMMUNITY

# Adding Sikhs to the Curriculum

From Utah to Mississippi, schools try to combat discrimination and bullying against a religious minority that is ‘highly visible’ but also ‘unknown to so many Americans’

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

**D**espite the large theological, geographic, and observable differences between Sikhism and Islam, Sikh populations in the United States have experienced suspicion, discrimination, and even violence ever since the Islamist terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, an advocacy organization for Sikh Americans—called the Sikh Coalition—formed to combat discrimination and to advocate for religious liberty.

Discrimination and prejudice against Sikhs has persisted in the two decades since then: On Aug. 5, 2012, a lone gunman and known white supremacist opened fire at a Sikh house of worship in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing seven. The next year, on the anniversary of

the shooting, the FBI approved a recommendation from its Advisory Policy Board to collect statistics on hate crimes against Sikhs. In 2015, the FBI began tracking anti-Sikh bias motivation in its hate crime statistics, along with bias against Mormons, Orthodox and “other” Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The FBI released a supplement to its 2021 Hate Crimes Statistics report, its most recent compilation, in March of this year (the report defines hate crimes “as a criminal offense that is motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias(es) against a person based on race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender, and gender identity”). In a statement announcing the release of the supplement, the FBI said that of the nearly 1,600 hate crimes motivated by religion, 11.6% were anti-Sikh—the

second-highest, after anti-Jewish incidents, which accounted for the majority. Indeed, the bureau’s Crime Data Exploration tool shows that the eighth-highest bias behind all hate crimes in 2021 was anti-Sikh motivation (214 incidents)—just below anti-Jewish (324) and anti-Asian hate crime (305), and higher than incidents of the kind of targeted violence that tends to garner more popular attention, such as against transgender (176), Arab (75), and Muslim (96) individuals. According to the CDE data, the number of anti-Sikh hate crimes has roughly doubled year over year since 2019, when 54 reported incidents were recorded, and 2020, which recorded 89.

But as Sikh populations continue to grow in various areas of the country, the Sikh Coalition has had success lobbying states to integrate information about Sikhs into their school curricula, as part of an effort to familiarize their neighbors with both their faith and their contributions to American society.

A five-minute video on the Sikh Coalition’s YouTube channel called “Who are the Sikhs?” is a short primer on how Sikhs are often identifiable by their names (Singh and Kaur are names given to initiated Sikhs, to men and women respectively, to help promote equality), and by visible religious symbols like turbans and beards. The video, produced in collaboration with the Fresno County Office of Education, also includes Sikh history in California, which began over



a century ago when Sikhs began immigrating to the developing American West, mostly from the Indian state of Punjab, and eventually emerged as key movers in California's agriculture and railroad industries.

In December 2022, the Sikh Coalition added Utah and Mississippi to its list of states that have incorporated Sikh awareness into their school curricula, bringing the total to 16 in over a decade-and-a-half of working with policymakers and communities. Their goal is to reach students in all 50 states.

"Sikhism is the fifth-largest major world religion," said Harman Singh, senior education manager for the Sikh Coalition. "But Sikhs and our historical contributions are largely absent from state educational standards." The Sikh Coalition, he said, is "16 for 16" in terms of states they have engaged, all of which have subsequently integrated Sikhism into their curricula.

Utah and Mississippi may seem like surprising early adopters of the Sikh social studies curricula. While neither Mississippi's Department of Education nor Utah's Board of Education could provide race or ethnicity data reflecting the size of their states' Sikh student bodies, both states have substantial Sikh populations. Today, the U.S. Census Bureau shows that Mississippi's Punjabi-speaking population near its capital, Jackson, is as high as in some areas of California's Central Valley, where the first Sikh house of worship was established in Stockton in 1912. (Punjabi speaking is not a one-to-one correlation

with Sikhism, but can serve as an indication of a Sikh population in the absence of census data on religion, which the Census Bureau does not collect.) Today, there are two gurdwaras, Sikh houses of worship, in Jackson, and one in Tupelo, Mississippi. Common estimates put the U.S.-wide Sikh population at about 500,000.

Mississippi's current social studies educational standards now include in its minority studies elective course objectives: "Examine social and political factors and events that have impacted attitudes and discrimination towards immigrants and religious communities (e.g., American Muslims, Hispanic Americans, West Indian Americans, Sikh Americans, American Hindus, American Jews, etc.)."

According to Sharon Turner, director of public affairs for the Utah State Board of Education, the inclusion of Sikhs in the state's sixth grade standards of instruction, covering the origins and key tenets of major world religions, reflects the board's conscientious effort to have a "pretty diverse representation of religions." Turner said Sikhs are an important—and growing—part of the state's increasing population. A study by the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah found that population growth in the state in 2022 was driven primarily by net migration into the state, which the study authors attributed to the easing of pandemic restrictions and a robust economy within the state.

"These victories in Utah and Mississippi represent years of careful and tireless work by community members and advocates at the Sikh Coalition to ensure that our children see themselves reflected in their curricula," said Simran Jeet Singh, executive director of the Aspen Institute's Religion & Society Program, and author of *The Light We Give: How Sikh Wisdom Can Transform Your Life*, in an email to Tablet. The Aspen Institute's Religion & Society Program is dedicated to leveraging religion to address social inequities and encourage social cohesion in a pluralistic society. "Sikhs are at once highly visible, in part due to our articles of faith, yet also unknown to so many Americans," he said.

"Starting with more inclusive education earlier should help to combat some prejudices and ignorance in the next generation. Educating our students about all religions in a constitutionally appropriate manner will help combat bullying and bias and will help prepare all kids to grow up and thrive in a diverse society."

Sikh founder Guru Nanak eschewed the Islam and Hinduism that surrounded him in 15th-century Punjab—where he was born in 1469—and developed his own theological system, in writings that today form the basis of Sikh scripture. Nanak was to be the first of 10 consecutive gurus (a reverential term meaning "enlightener"), who over time developed the canon of Sikh scripture and spiritual disciplines, as well as a rite of initiation into the Sikh community, also known as the Khalsa, for individuals who are committed to strict, orthodox adherence to those disciplines.

Khalsa members make a commitment to the "Five Ks," or the visible and tangible elements of Sikh adherence. The Sikh Coalition guide says those are: "*kesh* (unshorn hair), *kanga* (small comb), *kara* (steel bracelet), *kirpan* (religious article resembling a knife), and *kachera* (soldier-shorts)." Turbans, although perhaps the most easily identifiable external sign of Sikh membership, are not part of the Five Ks. Sikhs who are not members of the Khalsa are free to adopt whichever of the signs they like.

Likening them to wearing a wedding ring, the Sikh Coalition states: "The five articles of faith signify an individual's commitment to Sikhi and to the highest ideals of love and service to humanity. They serve as an external uniform that unifies Sikhs and binds them to the beliefs of the religion, and they are a daily reminder that Sikhs must live an honest, moral, kind, brave, and loving life."

The last of the 10 gurus, Guru Bogind Singh, died in 1708, which Sikhs believe marks the end of the faith's human leaders and established the authority of the Eternal Guru, called the Guru Granth Sahib, which is the teachings found in the Sikh scriptures themselves. The Guru Granth Sahib's contents are primarily verse poetry written in various languages, which are often sung. Central

## PODCAST NEWS

Tablet's **Unorthodox** podcast is excited to welcome actor **Joshua Malina** as our new co-host. Malina, who had memorable roles on 'The West Wing' and 'Scandal,' is currently appearing on Broadway in 'Leopoldstadt.' His first Unorthodox episode will air Thursday, May 25.

Listen here:  
[tabletmag.com/unorthodox](https://tabletmag.com/unorthodox)

to many Sikh rituals, it often occupies a throne within a gurdwara.

Harman Singh of the Sikh Coalition said that he finds the most obvious things people have a question about are the outward devotional symbols. “The external and the internal are both the same for the Sikh, in terms of what those articles of faith represent,” he said. He cites unshorn hair and beards as a sign of acceptance of God’s will, that “God made you the way that they did, and that you should accept that, and recognize the light within you, and trust that that is there for a reason,” whether or not you have hair. He also likens the identifiers to a uniform. He said he often uses the example with young people of being able to identify medical professionals in a hospital as individuals who can help you, by their lab coats or scrubs. Wearing the five articles in public, he said, is an outward display of commitment to living out certain values and fulfilling certain responsibilities. “My turban is literally a part of me,” he said, likening its removal to the removal of a limb. “It’s not just a symbol.”

It is outward signs of devotion that have marked Sikhs as targets for discrimination and violence, especially since 9/11.

Sikh community members were quick to recognize after the attacks that they would be targets for prejudice, Harman Singh said, and the organization was born after a group of Sikhs got on the phone together the night of Sept. 12, 2001. Early initiatives included pro bono legal services for Sikhs who were victims of hate crimes, discrimination, and bullying at school, and policy advocacy to advance Sikh interests and civil rights for minority groups.

Harman Singh experienced this abrupt cultural sea change firsthand. “I was born and raised in Michigan,” he said, where he and his brother were the only Sikhs at their school. As an eighth grader who wore a turban, “my whole world shifted overnight,” he said. “The experience I had on September 10th was very different than it was on September 12th.” Singh said he experienced bullying and hate for days, months, and years to come. Growing up after 9/11, he said he checked the index in his social studies

textbooks every year to see if Sikhs appeared. They never did, and, he noted, “I never had an opportunity to educate my classmates about my religion, about my community.”

In 2009, New Jersey became the first state to include Sikhism in its state social studies standards, after six years of advocacy from both the Sikh Coalition and New Jersey Sikhs.

“The most common problem in covering anti-Sikh violence is the framework of ‘mistaken identity,’” a Sikh Coalition media guide reads. “This framework is problematic because it implies that there is a ‘correct’ identity group that ought to be targeted. No community should be targeted.”

“Ignorance breeds animosity,” Harman Singh said. “And one of the best ways to keep students safe is through developing social studies standards, and teaching about not just the Sikh community, but many diverse communities as early as possible, because when we left children to kind of create and come up with their own understandings of what these different communities represent, they’re all going to default to what they see on social media, popular culture, and on the news. And unfortunately, oftentimes turbans and beards and brown skin, is often associated with terror, and so those are the assumptions that a lot of times people make at a very young age in this country, and that often unfortunately, leads to hate into adulthood.” He said internal surveys conducted by the Sikh Coalition have determined that over two-thirds of turbaned Sikh students report being bullied in school.

Harman Singh said in its work with schools, the Sikh Coalition has prioritized states with larger Sikh populations, typically working with gurdwaras first to obtain letters of support for their initiative, stating to officials that they want to see Sikhism integrated into educational standards. The coalition then prepares community members to attend board of education meetings to advocate for this inclusion. Singh said they also orchestrate campaigns to call and email officials to petition them.

Harman Singh said that the Sikh Coalition wants to go beyond the dates, geography, key beliefs, and historical

figures that often characterize the treatment of religion in social studies class, to “a more contemporary, modern understanding” of Sikh communities and their experiences, including immigration stories, their lives in the U.S. post-9/11, and their contributions to their communities at the local level, state by state. “There should not just be a historical understanding of what communities have gone through, but that we’re talking about the foundations of this country,” he said. “When we’re talking about current experiences, it’s important, because for a lot of community members, their religious affiliation may be their primary identity, and so it’s important to represent that and understand that within social studies standards.”

Harman Singh said that Sikhs in the U.S. are beginning to move from their traditional population centers on the East and West coasts, to places with lower costs of living and opportunities to start businesses, in the South and Midwest.

Currently, the Sikh Coalition has its sights set on Minnesota, which has a diverse religious population, but whose recently updated state educational standards for teaching elements of social identity, which include race, ethnicity, gender, and geography, do not include a comprehensive list of world religions. The organization has joined with a broad interfaith coalition, which together sent a letter to the Minnesota Department of Education in August 2021, to advocate for a more inclusive curriculum.

“In general, I believe it is important that we highlight faith traditions that are not necessarily of Abrahamic descent,” said one signatory, Rabbi Morris Allen, via email.

Harman Singh echoes Allen’s broad-minded view, citing his own religious faith: “The Sikh worldview really centers around the idea of oneness,” he said. “No matter who you are, what your background is, what your gender is, what your identity is, there is a unifying force within all of us that’s that one divine light, and that permeates in every single person in this earth.” ■

*This article was originally published on May 16, 2023.*

## THE REST

→ It appears that **Iran-linked hackers with potential Russian pedigree attempted to take down parts of Israel's early-warning defense system** in the latest rocket barrage from Gaza. Just as a new barrage of rockets were headed Israel's way, a hacker group called Anonymous Sudan claimed on Telegram that it had penetrated Cumta and Red Alert, two private apps that mimic the official government warning signals for incoming rockets. The hackers also claimed to have interfered directly in the Iron Dome's interception of the rockets, calling it "unprecedented." The Israeli military did acknowledge a "technical malfunction" but did not address the details of the hacker's claims. Another group, called Moses Staff, also claimed to be in on the action to interrupt Cumta during the attack. In March, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that **the Russians had likely been sharing more advanced cyber-warfare tech with their allies in Tehran.**

→ It's not so surprising these days to see another young, wealthy start-up founder with no publishing experience decide to buy a magazine. What's eye-catching about the news that **28-year-old auto tech founder, Austin Russell, has bought a majority stake in Forbes** is that the magazine is valued at nearly \$800 million. With the ink still drying on the coverage that Vice Media Group (valued at \$5.7 billion in 2017) has filed for bankruptcy and BuzzFeed News was shuttering its operation amid sagging ad revenue, the self-made billionaire says he's not fazed by the headwinds in a news industry that's largely been in decline over the past decade or more. "Forbes is something I had always looked up to as a brand and as a media empire," Russell said. Taking an 82% stake in Forbes, Russell says he will largely keep out of the daily operations of the magazine.

→ In a sprawling complaint filed on Monday in New York, a **former employee of Rudy Giuliani says her boss sexually assaulted her, held back wages, and regularly made "sexist, racist, and antisemitic remarks,"** including: "Jews want to go through their freaking Passover all the time, man oh man. ... Get over the Passover. It was like 3,000 years ago. The Red Sea parted, big deal. It's not the first time that happened," Giuliani said according to the suit. Seeking \$10 million in damages, Noelle Dunphy was hired by Donald Trump's former personal attorney in 2019 to help him with legal work and then fired two years later. During that brief tenure, Dunphy says her old boss informed "her that he was selling pardons for \$2 million, which he and President Trump would split." In a statement from a representative, Giuliani "unequivocally denies the allegations." It's been a tough few years for Giuliani, who saw his New York law license suspended in 2022 after an appeals court found that he had made "demonstrably false and misleading" statements about election fraud. Currently, **Giuliani remains the target of a criminal investigation in Georgia related to voter fraud in the 2020 election,** with prosecutors set to file charges sometime this summer.

→ Jacksonville, Florida, was the largest Republican-led city in the United States—until Tuesday night, when **Democrat Donna Deegan won the mayoral race by four points over Daniel Davis, despite the Republican's backing from Gov. Ron DeSantis and a bigger war chest.** It was just last year when Jacksonville went all in for DeSantis, boosting his gubernatorial re-election with a healthy 12% margin. State Democratic Party Chair Nikki Fried celebrated Deegan's win, saying, with another volley in the local culture war, "For too long, Jacksonville has been led by Republicans who are hell-bent on taking away our rights, and it's past time that the city is led by leaders with new, fresh ideas."

## THE BIG STORY

Four years in the making, Monday saw the release of John Durham's scathing report into how the Department of Justice handled allegations linking Donald Trump to Russia during the 2016 presidential election. A former federal prosecutor appointed as a special counsel during the Trump administration, Durham, who continued to lead the investigation under the Biden administration, found that the FBI's top officials suffered from a "confirmation bias" when they chose not to aggressively pursue evidence in two cases in which foreign nations were possibly seeking to sway the election in Hillary Clinton's favor, though they swiftly opened a probe into links between Trump and Moscow, acting on a vague lead "based on raw, unanalyzed, and uncorroborated intelligence." The report also found that the FBI "discounted or willfully ignored material information that did not support the narrative of a collusive relationship between Trump and Russia."

On CNN, Jake Tapper noted that the report is "devastating to the FBI and, to a degree, it does exonerate Donald Trump." Downplaying the conduct documented in the report as "missteps," the FBI said in a statement on Monday that "the conduct in 2016 and 2017 that Special Counsel Durham examined was the reason that current FBI leadership already implemented dozens of corrective actions, which have now been in place for some time.

—Sean Cooper

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# We're All Bored of Culture

Anglo-Calvinist moralism has turned the American arts into something strenuously polite and deadly dull

BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

I'm bored; you're bored; we're all bored. By our books and movies and television shows, the endless blandness of the Netflix queue, by our music and theater and art. Culture now is strenuously cautious, nervously polite, earnestly worthy, ploddingly obvious, and above all, dismally predictable. It never dares to stray beyond the four corners of the already known. Robert Hughes spoke of the shock of the new, his phrase for modernism in the arts. Now there's nothing that is shocking, and nothing that is new: irresponsible, dangerous; singular, original; the child of one weird, interesting brain. Decent we have, sometimes even good: well-made, professional, passing the time. But wild, indelible, commanding us without appeal to change our lives? I don't think we even remember what that feels like.

What accounts for this? Wokeness, of course, to begin with. The commissars are enemies of beauty. I'm channeling Dave Hickey here: Beauty incites desire, and desire is destabilizing. Desire is anarchic, and the commissars are control freaks. They tell us what we ought to want. The body positivity movement seeks to convince us, against the evidence of our senses, that all bodies are equally arousing. Amia Srinivasan, our philosopher of sex du jour, instructs us to reform our lusts according to politically acceptable parameters. So it is in art. Cancel Woody Allen, destroy that painting of Emmett Till, shut down *The Vagina Monologues*, and whatever you

do, don't laugh at Dave Chapelle (don't laugh at all, just clap).

But this is much older than wokeness. Hickey was writing in 1993 (the essay is "After the Great Tsunami," in *The Invisible Dragon*). He was attacking what he called "the therapeutic institution," that glob of bureaucracies—"a loose confederation of museums, universities, bureaus, foundations, publications, and endowments"—that had placed itself in charge of culture, taming art by telling us that it was "good for us": "enriching," redemptive, conducing both to civic virtue and to spiritual health. Hickey dates that transformation to the 1920s and '30s, naming as his leading culprits Stalin, Goebbels, and Alfred Barr, the founder of the Museum of Modern Art, but that seems to me both too early and too clever. The institution-building of the "culture boom" did not begin in earnest until after World War II, when a rapidly expanding middle class began to feel the need, as it rose, for the trappings of taste—"classical" music, European art, the great books as peddled by Mortimer Adler—and a brigade of explainers, promoters, and organizational functionaries stepped forth to fill it.

But it wasn't until the 1960s that the business grew urgent. The culture was getting out of hand. The children of that same middle class were threatening to burn the whole thing down. It is no coincidence, from that perspective, that the decade witnessed the creation of the NEA, the NEH, PBS, and, in 1970, NPR: organs designed to furnish the college-going class with an officially

sanctioned consciousness. The same years saw the overhaul of admissions practices at elite colleges and universities, those bastions of the WASP aristocracy. Jewish quotas were removed, affirmative action was instituted, and the great unwashed—or, at least, their future leaders—were now to be initiated into the cultural folkways of high Protestantism. Meanwhile, the MFA, which had been invented in the 1920s, was proliferating. From 1940 to 1980, the number of institutions awarding graduate degrees in studio art increased from 11 to 147, with comparable numbers in creative writing. Artists became creatures of the university: produced there and more and more often employed there, which meant socialized and homogenized there.

Art, in short, was being normed. After a century or so, as Hickey explains, in which it had evaded institutional control—a century of Parisian bohemians, modernist vagabonds, and visionary wackjobs, of Rimbaud, van Gogh, Nijinsky, Cage, Gertrude Stein, et al.—art was being standardized and, more importantly, moralized. The audience, in other words, was being normed as well. Orthodox faith was declining, at least among the liberal elite. Art emerged as a substitute religion, but a religion in the old, persistent American mode. Into culture flowed the moral energies of Anglo-Calvinism, in all its joyless, witch-hunting glory.

And then a funny thing happened. American humanities professors, devoid of large ideas of their own, began to fling themselves at the feet of the new French theory. The denizens of allied institutions—museums, foundations, quarterlies—having been trained in those fields, knelt down beside their teachers. From this unnatural congress, Puritan zeal bred to post-Enlightenment philosophy, sprang the chimera known as wokeness, or in its adolescence, political correctness—new intellectual hooch in the same old moralistic bottles. "Somehow," writes Hickey, "the delicate instrumentalities of continental thought had been transmuted by the American professoriate into a highfalutin, pseudo-progressive

billy club with which to beat dissenters about the head and shoulders.”

For Hickey, the answer was the market. Dirty, demotic, democratic: The market is a playground of desire, the place we go to meet our needs no matter what the minister might think. But Hickey was writing about the art world, a realm of unique, expensive objects, where the market means collectors, people rich enough to purchase what they like and everybody else be damned. That’s not the way things work in most of the arts—music, writing, film and television—the ones that most of us consume most of the time. Those are mass markets, and they were also changing.

Labels started to consolidate. Publishing companies likewise. Large conglomerates began to buy them up, along with television networks, Hollywood studios, and high-profile magazines. The culture industry became more centralized, more corporatized—even in its upper reaches, more commercialized. Gone were independent-minded figures like Maxwell Perkins at Scribners, Ahmet Ertegun at Atlantic Records, and William Shawn at *The New Yorker*. New things still happened in culture, but they were rapidly converted into formulas, as with punk and hip-hop in the ’80s, grunge in the ’90s, indie movies in the 2000s, golden age television in the 2010s.

The point is not that corporations have degraded popular taste. It is the opposite. The culture industry, like the junk food industry, has gotten very good at satisfying it, at reflecting back our taste to us. And with the internet, the feedback loops have gotten ever more efficient. Art is boring now, in other words, because we are boring. Art is woke because we are woke. Art is bland and unimaginative because we have landed ourselves in the lamentable position of getting exactly what we want.

Matters wouldn’t be so bad had not the internet destroyed the economic underpinnings of artistic livelihoods. Content has been de-monetized: We pay little or nothing for music, writing, film and television, and many forms of visual art, with the result that incomes in those fields have cratered. Daring,

original work has always been supported, at least at first, by coterie audiences. Now—with rising rents and dropping day-job pay on top of disappearing revenue—a coterie is not enough.

Wokeness can only exert its tyranny, in fact, because artists are operating on an economic knife edge. They do not have the luxury of alienating their audience, not even part of it or even for a little while. Not of shocking it, not even of challenging it. And wokeness also acts to hide the deeply repetitive nature of contemporary culture. “Diversity” becomes a cloak for uniformity. The same old thing—the same kitsch pop songs, middlebrow fiction, wish-fulfillment streaming fare, agitprop gallery art—produced by a member of a “marginalized” “community,” convinces us that we have gotten somewhere new.

We are boring, but we have always been boring. You know who isn’t boring? Artists. Artists aren’t like you and me. Their brains are different; their souls are different. I don’t know where that difference comes from, but I know it’s real. Its hallmark is precisely the capacity to bring the new to birth. “None of us is as smart as all of us” goes the hive-age bromide, getting it exactly wrong. All the weirdness that we’re missing now, the wild originality, can only come from the activity of singular spirits: contemptuous of imitation, courageous in the extreme, obedient to nothing but the effort to achieve their vision. They are out there, I know, they are doing their work, but only on the margins, in the cracks. Expose them to the light, give them some mainstream attention, and instead of dragging us a little way in their direction, as they would have once, they just get homogenized, too. And it is tough; it’s very, very tough. Creative work, wrote Elizabeth Hardwick, “is difficult, hard, and disturbing in the deepest way. You are up against the limits of yourself, your mind, your knowledge, your talent, your courage, your fineness, your energy.”

That is where the rest of us come in. We can’t help being boring, but we can help being lazy, and we are lazy now as never before. It is easy to laugh at the postwar audience, with its aspiration to culture, but at least it aspired. At least

it felt that lack. Aspiration was indeed an obligation then, at least in certain precincts. I’m thinking of the college students of the 1960s and ’70s, the seriousness with which so many of them set about the task of winching themselves up to a higher level of consciousness: reading Kafka and Sartre, watching European films, scrutinizing modern art, puzzling out the messages of Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed. It was her embodiment of that approach to life, as much as anything, that made Susan Sontag a cultural icon. I don’t much see that kind of aspiration anymore (it was already fading out when I arrived on campus in the early ’80s), that sense of urgent incompleteness, that hunger for a higher other. What I see is narcissism: a demand that art affirm us, never threaten us, never make us feel inadequate or ignorant or small, echo back to us our precious little selves.

A great audience, Fran Lebowitz once remarked, is more important for the creation of great art than even great artists are. She was thinking, in fact, of the postwar audience, specifically in New York, the one that nurtured Balanchine, Rauschenberg, Miles Davis, and so many others. Great audiences create great artists, she explained, by giving people the freedom to take chances: to be irresponsible, dangerous, difficult, strange. When people compete to be sophisticated, artists win. Then we all win. ■

*This article was originally published on May 15, 2023.*

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# 'Marm' Mandelbaum: Queen of the Fences

Overseeing an army of thieves and pickpockets on the Lower East Side in the late 1800s, she was 'as adept in her business as the best stock-broker in Wall Street'

BY ALLAN LEVINE

*Chronicled and mythologized in scholarly and popular history books, novels, films, and plays, New York's Lower East Side in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was overcrowded and teeming with peddlers, tailors, sweatshops, and barely livable tenement houses. By 1910, an estimated 540,000 Jews resided within the neighborhood's 1.5 square miles. The poverty, hardships, and daily struggle to survive drove some Jewish immigrants to seek other ways to make a living, even get rich. Hence, the Lower East Side also had a vast collection of crooks, pimps, prostitutes, thieves, pickpockets, gangsters, fraudsters, forgers, arsonists, and hoodlums. Offered here and in future articles are portraits of some of these nefarious characters, who also left their mark on the Lower East Side's historical legacy.*

*"The woman has really been for more than twenty years the nucleus and center of the whole organization of crime in New York. She is believed to have furnished the capital without which extensive enterprises even of theft cannot be carried on. She is known to have been the 'fence' through which stolen goods were disposed of, and without the facilities thus furnished robbery as a business would have been impossible."*

—New York Times, July 24, 1884

**T**here was no ignoring Fredericka "Marm" Mandelbaum. At the height of her notoriety as the "Queen of the Fences" in the 1870s and early 1880s, she commanded attention. She was a charming, large woman, about 250 pounds. She had "a sharply curved mouth and extraordinarily fat cheeks," according to journalist Herbert Asbury, "above which were small black eyes, heavy black brows and a high sloping forehead, and a mass of tightly rolled black hair which was generally

surmounted by a tiny black bonnet with drooping feathers."

Mandelbaum portrayed herself as the owner of a modest dry goods and haberdashery store on Clinton Street in the Lower East Side; a widow after her husband, Wolf, died in 1875, the mother of four children, and a respected member of Congregation Temple Rodeph Sholom, then located near her store and home. (The store was on the ground floor and the family's luxurious apartment was on the second and third floors.)

Yet in reality, for more than two decades Marm Mandelbaum was the premier "receiver of stolen goods" in New York City. Known throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, she operated an extensive criminal enterprise, supported by a small army of thieves, burglars, pickpockets, shoplifters, and "second-story" climbers who worshipped her. But she was protected or ignored by New York City police officers and detectives, who were willfully blind to her illegal activities, or were paid off by her. "For 25 years, Mrs. Mandelbaum has carried on a most successful business as

a receiver of stolen goods," commented Robert Pinkerton, the co-director of the famed Pinkerton National Detective Agency in 1884. "She is known at least by name to every thief and detective in the United States, and has received plunder from nearly every city in the country secured by traveling gangs of professional thieves."

Mandelbaum also benefited from the fact that at the time it was difficult, if not impossible, to track and identify stolen goods, especially once tags, labels, and markings were expertly removed. Even on the rare occasion when she got into trouble with the police, she was skillfully defended by William Howe and Abraham Hummel of the well-known law firm of Howe & Hummel, who specialized in representing murderers, burglars, and criminals of every type. She paid them an annual retainer of \$5,000 (\$136,500 today) and they kept her out of jail—until she was caught in a sting operation in 1884 that put her out of the "fence" business.

For Marm, often described as a "shrewd" businesswoman, crime did, in fact, pay and she became as wealthy as any Fifth Avenue magnate. It has been estimated that during her more than two-decade reign (1862 to 1884), she bought and sold as much as \$10 million worth of stolen property (approximately \$273 million today) likely netting her a personal fortune of between \$500,000 and \$1 million dollars (\$13.6 million to \$27.3 million today). As George W. Walling, who served as the chief of the NYPD from 1874 to 1885 and was one of her biggest fans, put it in his memoirs, "she could have easily earned an excellent living simply by keeping a dry goods establishment. She preferred 'minting' money by dealing with thieves ... and was as adept in her business as the best stock-broker in Wall Street." She also owned property in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Albany, New York, and Passaic, New Jersey, which was mostly used for warehousing the plunder she acquired.

Mandelbaum's rise to infamy in the New York crime world was a matter of circumstance. In 1850, 25-year-old Fredericka (Weisner) Mandelbaum joined

her husband, Wolf Mandelbaum, who had journeyed to New York sometime earlier. They were among the 3 million German-speaking immigrants escaping economic hardship and restrictive government regulation who arrived in the United States in the period from 1820 to 1880, of whom an estimated 150,000 were Jewish. Many German Jews and non-Jews ended up in New York City, where, like Fredericka and Wolf, they settled in the crowded tenement houses of *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany), the East Side neighborhood.

In New York, the Mandelbaums initially eked out a living as peddlers selling cloth and trinkets, while Fredericka gave birth to two boys and two girls between 1860 and 1867. By then, Fredericka, who wanted more out of life, had gradually transformed herself into “Marm,” a maternal figure and teacher to impoverished children and teenagers, whom she trained as pickpockets and shoplifters. She bought whatever they delivered to her and in turn sold it to other dealers for a slight premium. This was the start of her career as a “fence.”

Marm’s criminal operations first came to the attention of the NYPD in 1862. Her background as a “German-Jewess” was often highlighted in later news stories about her; George Walling noted that while moving merchandise she was prone to haggle “enough to satisfy her race instinct.”

With the money she and Wolf made, they leased a building on Clinton Street near the corner of Rivington Street, where they established a dry goods and haberdashery store and resided with their family. By 1873, they owned the entire property. The business did well, but the building also had a long clapboard wing that for many years was used as warehouse for the stolen goods that were acquired. Later, she had other warehouses to store her ill-gotten booty.

Marm, who perfected her English-language skills, was in Walling’s opinion definitely the brains of the operation, “a thorough business woman”; he dismissed Wolf as a “non-entity.” With Wolf’s death, Marm soon reached the zenith of her position as the most prominent receiver of stolen goods—or “swag”—in the city.

New York’s steadily increasing population and the growth of its commercial enterprises, especially the textile business, provided ample opportunities for thieves and burglars. Marm took full advantage of this confluence of demographic and economic factors and cultivated a loyal cadre of rogues, men and women, who supplied her with an almost never-ending stock of stolen goods. Michael Kurtz—alias “Sheeney Mike,” a leader of the infamous Dutch mob pickpocket gang and an expert safe burglar—and Sophie Lyons, “perhaps the most notorious confidence woman America has ever produced,” according to Asbury, were only two of dozens of crooks who sought out Mandelbaum for her assistance and guidance. She, in turn, watched over and mentored them, accepted their stolen goods (in later years, she contracted them to steal certain valuable items) entertained them at parties, dinners, and picnics, and most importantly, offered financial support and bail money when any of them were arrested. And, “if [her] efforts [to free them] were successful, she always taxed them double the expenses,” as a *New York Times* profile of her pointed out in July 1884. Presumably, none of the thieves complained about this tithe.

Mandelbaum knew good quality. Above all, she favored silk, a popular fabric in the 19th century for ladies’ dresses and corsets and men’s bow ties and handkerchiefs, among other fashionwear, and plentiful at New York City’s silk houses. Next on her list were sealskin handbags, gold and silverware, jewels, lace, and other precious goods—even horses and carriages. When her thieves and pickpockets—she trained and worked with female shoplifters who targeted such New York department stores as Lord & Taylor and A.T. Stewart—delivered the plunder to her, Marm bought it from them and profited from the subsequent sale. For silk worth \$3 a yard, she paid the criminal supplier slightly more than 20%, or 65 cents, and then resold it for at least twice that much.

Ever careful, she completely trusted only a few individuals including her eldest son, Julius, who became integral to the family business and her



## Album of the Week

Jana Horn, *The Window Is the Dream*

Jana Horn has made an album in line with a Wes Andersonian view of her home state Texas, *The Window Is the Dream*: a subtle work that opens up a rich world of detail and sound.

The lyrics on *The Window* are not straightforward, yet they are specific. Her scenes are slippery and fluid. On “The Dream,” she says that “The rose is in the mind / The thorn is in my mind’s eye / To find by the blind spot / It seems the ends aren’t enough.” The song’s lovely guitar spins a web, as Horn refuses to leave the struggle lightly: “The last thing I want / In this bath of existence is / Not to float myself into it / As any bird might stop flying.”

Horn is a songwriter’s songwriter, currently working on her MFA at the University of Virginia. Growing up in a small Texas town, she found herself clinging to anyone she heard who used words in a clever and unexpected manner. At first it meant Eminem and Weird Al. Now, she says in a recent interview, she looks to “Jung and Clarice Lispector and all these authors who are really breaking down dimensions and giving dreams and things like that that don’t necessarily have empirical value the right to exist.” The result is an album that functions not so much as background music, but as fresh air.

—David Meir Grossman

chief assistant, Hermann Stoude (or Herman Stout). Often, when contacted about goods that had to be sold, she sent Stoude to evaluate them before any money changed hands. She was meticulous in ensuring that before stolen goods were resold, they were painstakingly examined for any identifying marks or tags. Because she knew that to stay out of trouble with the police, the goods could not be traced back to her or one of her thieves.

Despite these precautions, she was eventually ensnared. New York silk merchants were angry; they were losing \$5,000 to \$6,000 each year because of theft. In 1884, Peter Olney, the newly appointed district attorney of New York County, an anti-Tammany Democrat who was determined to end this crime spree as well as corruption in the NYPD, responded to the merchants' plea for help. His target was Marm Mandelbaum. Olney was not naive. He knew that if he assigned officers of the NYPD the assignment of shutting Mandelbaum's operation down, nothing would happen; the police had let her skirt the law for decades and that was not about to change. Instead, he enlisted Robert Pinkerton and his detective agency, which devised an undercover scheme to entrap her.

It required four months of planning. First, for three weeks, a Pinkerton operative named Gustave Frank was instructed by a silk dealer on the business of buying and selling silk. At the same time, secret markings, which even Mandelbaum and her team would not find, were placed on bolts of silk, product that was soon stolen. Posing as a crooked trader named "Stein," Frank infiltrated Mandelbaum's inner circle and gained her trust. During a three-month period, she eventually agreed to sell him 12,000 yards of silk, some of which had the secret markings on it. Once Olney was confident that he had a solid case against her, Mandelbaum was arrested, along with her son Julius and her assistant Stoude. In searching her house, Pinkerton detectives discovered a huge cache of stolen goods including more silk and jewelry.

Mandelbaum's arrest and appearance in the Harlem Police Court received

prominent coverage in the New York press. The *Times* even wrote an editorial about it, declaring that "the disgrace of this case is that in New York only has the receiving and sale of stolen goods been carried on for years as openly as if it were a legitimate industry. Mrs. Mandelbaum's business has been as much under the protection of the law as the business of any one of the firms whose stolen goods constituted her stock in trade."

Charged with possession of stolen silk, she posted bail and was released. She then ensured that Julius and Stoude also got out on bail. Back in court a week later, Mandelbaum pleaded her innocence. "I buy and sell dry goods as other dry goods people do," she stated. "I have never knowingly bought stolen goods ... I have never, never stolen in my life ... I feel that these charges are brought out against me for spite. I have never bribed the police or had their protection. I never gave money to any person whatsoever to bribe or influence any officials, so help me God .... I never knew that any one piece of the silk was stolen ... I got the property now produced ... in an honest and business-like way." Yet, she was hardly a victim and few people in the courtroom, including the judge and Olney's officials, believed her.

A career criminal as clever and cunning as Mandelbaum was not about to be locked up. Her lawyers managed to drag on the proceedings for several months by requesting a transfer of the case to a higher court, which was granted. On Dec. 4, when the trial was to finally start, Mandelbaum was nowhere to be found. Despite Pinkerton detectives maintaining a 24-hour watch on her house, with the help of a servant who disguised herself as Mandelbaum, Marm managed to slip away. A day later, it was reported in the newspapers that she had crossed the U.S.-Canada border by train and arrived in Toronto wearing a "rich sealskin coat and cape." Her son Julius and Stoude had accompanied her. Olney had a problem because in 1884 the crime for which Mandelbaum, her son, and assistant were charged with was not an extraditable offense. He resigned himself

to the fact that unless Marm returned voluntarily, she would not face justice in a New York courtroom.

By Dec. 8, the trio had relocated to the city of Hamilton, Ontario, 42 miles southwest. Acting independently, the Hamilton police located them and after a search, they were arrested for vagrancy for allegedly bringing stolen diamonds into the country. It was a flimsy charge that did not hold up; the New York City jeweler who had claimed the diamonds had been stolen from his store traveled to Hamilton for a hearing, but was unable to positively identify them. Within a few days, Mandelbaum, Julius, and Stoude were released; it took several more weeks before the Canadian authorities returned the diamonds to her after she paid customs fees and expenses of \$614.

Thereafter, Mandelbaum settled in Hamilton and lived a quieter life. For a time, she operated a small dry goods business. Rumor had it that she returned to New York only once in the following decade to watch from a distance the funeral of her youngest child, Anna. Even if the story was true, and she certainly had the gumption to take such a risk, she was not apprehended by the police. Following a long illness, she died in Hamilton on Feb. 26, 1894, at the age of 69. "Old 'Mother' Mandelbaum Is Dead," *The New York Times* noted in a brief story about her infamous career.

Marm Mandelbaum was gone but not easily forgotten. More than a year later, *The Great Diamond Robbery*, a melodrama by Edward Alfriend and Andrew Wheeler about love and crime, opened at the American Theatre and received a positive review in the *Times*. During this five-act story of murder, a diamond robbery, young love, and conspirators at every turn, "Frau Rosenbaum" eventually makes her appearance, described by the newspaper's reviewer as a "receiver of stolen goods of the Mother Mandelbaum type." As historian Rona Holub, who has studied Marm's career, points out, "theatergoers knew exactly upon whom the character was based." ■

*This article was originally published on May 18, 2023.*



# Signs and Wonders

Making sense of the unexpected messages on billboards and street flyers in Los Angeles

BY EMIL STERN

Los Angeles, as befits a city in the desert, is a metropolis of signs. You can find poetry, if not exactly logic, falling like wisteria blooms from personal injury lawyers' ads: "Jacob—a lawyer—your lawyer." You can consider actors' For Your Consideration campaigns for a good two or three years after the awards for the show or movie in question have been given out. Not for nothing did Thomas Pynchon set *The Crying of Lot 49* in LA, where if you happen to be looking, you can find your visual field crowded with symbols and scratching open to interpretation.

LA's billboards can make for some surprising juxtapositions. Recently, a striking image of a delicate, flesh-toned orchid burnished with a dew drop advertised the services of a vaginal rejuvenation clinic on a sign atop Pico Kosher Glatt Mart, a venue noted more for its affordable steam tray *khoresh* than its steamed labial treatments. Older Persian Jewish women went in and out to buy chicken; I don't know if any of them glanced up. Farther up on Robertson, there is a billboard with a tagline that sounds suspiciously like a tourism ad or a *Star Wars* reboot: "Auschwitz: Not Long Ago. Not Far Away." It turns out to be for an exhibit at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Recently, another billboard on Robertson went up announcing that MOSHIACH IS HERE, only to be replaced a couple of weeks later by one for *Disenchanted*, the Amy Adams Disney sequel. MOSHIACH made a recent return, and honestly, it's like he never left—just part of the landscape, like the cast of *American Horror Story*.

For those who don't have the resources of a billboard campaign behind them, there is the street flyer. Religious zealotry and flyers share a rich, symbiotic history, going back to the days when Martin Luther handwrote and nailed his theses to a church door. The medieval commentator Rashi's commentary, too, first appeared in booklets. With contemporary strides in desktop publishing and Scotch tape technology, thousands of proclaimers can bloom in LA like cactus flowers, and the path from something sitting on your chest to getting off it and onto a lamp post is as smooth as the 405.

When I first moved to LA and then when the pandemic limited my options to taking walks around my neighborhood, I would take note of the signs stuck to lampposts. They announced Persian musicians' tours (SHARAM IS COMING). Some locals put up not-great-but-certainly-sincere poetry tied to the Jewish holiday cycle. One flyer proclaimed in Hebrew the terrible mistake one could make by wearing Nike shoes: Nike is, after all, the Greek goddess of victory. How could a believer wear such idolatrous shoes on their feet? It struck me as unfortunate that the people most receptive to this message were also the ones most likely to benefit from a brisk jog, but I don't know how successful this campaign was.

Some of the most evergreen flyers taped up involve announcements of visits by the Biale Rebbe, a descendant of the Biale dynasty "known for his inspiration, wisdom, advice, and blessing," per the flyer. I called a friend who is close to the Biale Rebbe to ask him about these, but it turned out the flyers were for a *different* Biale Rebbe, the

brother of the one my friend knows (the one he knows is from Jerusalem; the advertised one is from Bnei Brak). Adherents of each will caution to accept no imitations, to make sure, if you do go, to go to the correct one; while the dynasty originated in Biała Rawska, Poland, it now has branches worldwide.

Sometimes, it can feel like LA is expressing its essential unease, the preoccupations it swears by and then it immediately disavows, through its signs and billboards. In the classic 1991 Steve Martin movie *LA Story*, his character gets advice from whimsical traffic signs by the side of the road. Is that what people are hoping for when they put billboards and flyers up? To issue advice, rather than receive it?

Erez Safar recently put up flyers around the neighborhood featuring the phrase "God is revealed and concealed in love." This phrase puzzled me when I first saw it. If I'd wanted to take advice from it, like Steve Martin in *LA Story*, I'm not sure I would have been able to. What did Erez hope to achieve with his sign? I asked him over Messenger. So much of what we see is advertising, he wrote back. He was inspired by Shepard Fairey to take his message to the streets. As for the signs' meaning, he wrote: "Concealed and Revealed within love / Concealed when love is lacking when we act from the opposite of love ... meaning we judge unfavorably and act from darkness and hate and revealed within love when we act from it when love is revealed within us brought out within us and each other."

Wanting to be upfront, I told him it gave me a headache. He said he was happy it had provoked any response, but our exchange grew increasingly testy, for which I take full responsibility. The sentiment had its roots, he said, in complicated Breslover philosophy. I could buy his book for more details. But I should know that a girl in Williamsburg was touched by it and featured it on her Instagram. Deepak Chopra reached out to him on his mother's second *yahrzeit*. Maybe shorter was better. I did not like being condescended to when he told me it was too profound to explain to someone like me, or that too much explaining

would ruin it. "I think people are used to seeing signs that are advertising something and rarely a thought about love or light," he said, and he wanted to inspire people, not add to the negativity in the world. I could still buy his book for further clarification. When he insisted that if I write about it, I do it in a spirit of positivity, this struck me as a little dictatorial for something quite literally posted in the public square. But it made more sense when he mentioned that it was a tribute to his late mother. I have been in grief, too, and I too have looked for signs. I could understand why someone would want to put their own code out there, to pass the headache on.

If you ask me which flyers I prefer, I'd tell you the less cryptic ones. A current one is for An Evening of Miracles, featuring the CEO of American Dream and a full sushi bar. Why would you stay in and watch Netflix with *that* as an option?

As it happened, I did go to see the Biale Rebbe a few years ago (not the advertised one, the other one). Not because of the sign but because he was being hosted by my friends, who importuned me

to visit. The vibe was medieval court-cum-LA-balcony party, but the Biale Rebbe is no pothead. He vapes tobacco, incessantly and with determination. On the one hand, I was concerned for his health, but on the other I thought it was pretty impressive to make an appearance with one's own personal smoke machine. He puffed away as we chatted, writing notes in Hebrew on a piece of paper while the smoke curled around his beard and the gray wisps became indistinguishable from his facial hair.

After some pleasant back and forth through a translator (he spoke modern Hebrew, not Yiddish), he told me that "nothing is missing." Quite a lot was missing from my life at the time, but I found the idea reassuring. I went back out into the California night feeling some residual embarrassment at having been there in the first place, but also a bit philosophical about the idea of lack, what it means to feel satisfied. Have you ever found something pleasant but also regretted doing it? It was like that. I found him refreshingly normal, chatty. I also felt quite good about my decision to not make a donation. But that's not

the kind of testimonial you could put on a flyer.

Street posts are where we put our grief and our attempts to connect. Those attempts will reach some, irk others—should anyone note them at all. These flyers and billboards are, of course, about selling things. What unites them is their promise of inspiration and rejuvenation, vaginal or otherwise. That promise will be alluring to some. For others, their innermost parts will feel just fine as they are, barely touched by the California sunshine.

When I mentioned to my fiancée, Rachel, that I was writing about the signs on lampposts in our neighborhood, she said, *What?* Like a normal person, she largely tunes them out. I am less likely to take in what they are trying to tell me, since we got engaged. I see that it takes a certain intelligence to read the signs, but a greater one sometimes to ignore them, that happiness is a great cure for trying to make sense of the signs around you. ■

*This article was originally published on May 15, 2023.*

## STONE COLD TRUTH

## Tablet

elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies  
's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning  
political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left  
right. It's the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's  
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sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left and right. It's the elite

# Cheese-Filled Sambusak

BY JOAN NATHAN

## INGREDIENTS

### THE DOUGH:

- 1 ½ cups smeed (semolina, not semolina flour)**
- 2 ½ to 3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour**
- Dash salt**
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature**

### THE FILLING:

- 3 large eggs**
- 1 pound Muenster, Armenian braided cheese, mozzarella, or kashkeval cheese, in chunks**
- 6 ounces feta cheese, in chunks**
- Dash salt (optional)**
- ½ cup roasted sesame or nigella seeds or a combination of both**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Mix the semolina with the all-purpose flour in the bowl of a food processor equipped with a steel blade. Add the salt, oil, and butter. Pulse until the dough is lumpy; do not over mix. Add ¾ cup water, pulsing until the dough together is smooth and pliable. Set the dough aside.

### Step 2

Prepare the filling by beating 2 of the eggs, then mix with the grated cheese or cheeses and salt. The mixture should be slightly dry.

### Step 3

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees and cover 2 cookie sheets with parchment paper.

### Step 4

Roll out dough to a 1/8-inch thickness with a rolling pin, your hands, or a tortilla press. If using a tortilla press, cover with plastic wrap so the dough doesn't stick to the press. Then cut into circles.

### Step 5

Put 1 tablespoon of the filling in the middle of the circle. Fold one side over the other to form a half moon. Press the edges to close and crimp them, if desired. Put the sambusak on the 2 cookie sheets, leaving 1/2 inch between them.

### Step 6

Beat the remaining egg and brush it on the pastries. Then sprinkle with seeds.

### Step 7

Bake the sambusak for 15 to 20 minutes on the middle and lower racks of the oven until slightly golden, switching racks after 10 minutes. Do not overcook.

**Yield:** about 60 sambusak

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