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About

The *Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* (JAAAS) is a peer-reviewed gold open-access journal which provides an interdisciplinary space for discussions about all aspects of American studies. The journal functions as a forum for Americanists in Austria and the global academic community. Published twice a year, the journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics, aiming to broaden the multi- and interdisciplinary study of American cultures.

Aims

Interrogating the notion of “America” and looking at the U.S. within its transnational and (trans-)hemispheric interconnections, JAAAS seeks to challenge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together original and innovative work by scholars who focus on topics as diverse as literature, cultural studies, film and new media, visual arts, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, performance studies, queer studies, border studies, mobility studies, age studies, game studies, and animal studies. Apart from offering insights into trans- and international American literary and cultural studies and offering European perspectives on America, the journal also solicits scholarship that deals with history, music, politics, geography, ecocriticism, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, law, and any other aspect of American culture and society.

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Das Land
Steiermark

→ Wissenschaft und Forschung

Special Issue

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The American Entrepreneurial Spirit

A Primer

Allow us to begin the introduction to this special issue by way of a deliberately exceptionalist polemic: to think and act entrepreneurially is as American as the proverbial apple pie. There is certainly no shortage of examples that seem to corroborate such a sweeping assertion. Consequently, a seemingly banal, inconspicuous sliver of American everyday life shall serve as an inaugural touchstone: the lemonade stand. It is safe to say that the lemonade stand has been a fixture at different community events (e.g. little league sporting events, charity drives, and neighborhood beautification initiatives) and especially at yard and garage sales for decades. Most people can imagine the dynamics of a yard sale: while their parents, or legal guardians, are hawking their wares, answering questions from potential buyers, chatting with the neighbors, the children undertake the very basic enterprise of selling lemonade, or similar delights such as ice cream or cookies. Even though running a lemonade stand involves virtually no economic risk, it still instantiates a basic capitalist act that requires the marshaling of resources, initiative, and action with the view to reaping anticipated, albeit not guaranteed, financial gain. The practice of the lemonade stand has thus acculturated generations of young Americans to basic entrepreneurial thinking.

Despite—or perhaps “because of”—its innocuousness, the lemonade stand belies a kind of “superstructure” of entrepreneurism as a (narrative) discourse that permeates American history, culture, and society. When children run a lemonade stand, they perform a role that—as preposterous as it may sound—entangles them with the earliest European colonial incursions in the Americas, the constitutional founding of the nation, the titans of the Gilded Age (such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Ford), and the purportedly genius wizards of its late-stage capitalist sequel (that is, the likes of Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk—note that these are all white men). Entrepreneurism and entrepreneurial success are often clothed in the language of rationality—figures and data points that we might find in business studies books, balance sheets, and quarterly earnings reports but also at product launches and in the biographies of these captains of industry. However, “despite its formidable-looking mathematical notations and seemingly abstract matter-of-fact

presentation,” David Hamilton reminds us, “the part of economic theory concerning the entrepreneur appears to be a scholarly or sacred version of a popular folk myth.”¹ Indeed, it is important to remember that we do not experience our world as raw information, figures, and data points but rather through narrative forms and narrativizing structures that, in turn, acculturate, educate, and inform our experience of the world through representations thereof. After all, those balance sheets, quarterly earnings reports, and executive summaries are themselves narrative vehicles. Consequently, we will employ four narratives set between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1930s addressing entrepreneurialism to craft a primer based on which readers may then explore the various thematic trajectories that the contributors explore in their articles.

The first, *Moby-Dick* (1851), is, of course, a classic of American literature. Although *Moby-Dick* (and its titular whale, for that matter) seemingly reveals new ideas, topics, and meanings upon each re-reading, one of the issues that Herman Melville’s book touches on is the American whaling industry of the nineteenth century. While Ishmael may have signed up on the *Pequod* to cast out the “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul,”² and while Captain Ahab may pursue the White Whale to take revenge for losing his leg in a previous encounter with the majestic beast, the whaling ship and its multicultural crew represent an entire industry; it was an industry that then-U.S. senator William H. Seward, echoing the founding generation’s keen concerns over whaling,³ considered “a source of national wealth, and an element of national force and strength.”⁴ Starbuck, the first mate, is the only character to remind Captain Ahab that the *Pequod*’s goal is *not* chasing after a “dumb brute.”⁵ If Moby Dick, Starbuck reasons, “comes in the way of the business we follow,” they should kill the mighty whale. However, he stresses, “I came here to hunt whales, not my commander’s vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? it will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market.”⁶ While generations of scholars have agreed that Starbuck’s rationality confronts Ahab’s megalomaniacal quest for revenge in this scene, the first mate, in fact, embodies *Homo economicus* here—“a being who inevitably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessaries, conveniences, and luxuries.”⁷ And in order to generate revenue, the products and/or their source materials must be scarce. Although whale parts were used for producing a variety of products,⁸ arguably the most important one was whale oil. “Quite simply,” Richard Alley has concluded, “humans burned whales for energy. The ocean didn’t produce whales fast enough to meet our demands.”⁹ *Moby-Dick* reflects on these natural limits, wondering “whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc; whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff.”¹⁰ Even though *Moby-Dick* is a mul-

tifarious text, the book cautions against capitalism run amok, unbridled and reckless entrepreneurial ventures that ignore various contexts, including the scarcity of natural resources. Indeed, Ahab may reject the capitalist engine driving the *Pequod* (“Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons. What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prating to me, Starbuck, about these miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience”¹¹), but he somewhat listens to reason (or, rather, the economics of whaling) and allows his crew to hunt whales, after all. Only when the quest’s focus turns to the eradication of one particular whale (that is, the annihilation of the actual basis of their income) does this attempt result in the (self-) destruction of the capitalist enterprise represented by the *Pequod*, too.

Whereas whale oil was a key energy source in the mid-nineteenth century, petroleum had replaced it by the end of the century. The booming oil industry of that era has found ample representation in film and other media.¹² For example, the movie *Boom Town* (1940) features Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy as two oil prospectors, called John McMasters and John Sand, respectively. More specifically, the two characters are “wildcatters”—(usually) men who drilled for oil wells in areas not known to be oil fields. The opening text crawl defines these wildcatters as “a hard-driving breed of Americans . . . made of the bone and blood of pioneers.”¹³ The story begins in Burk Burnett, Texas, in 1918. Burk Burnett is a bustling oil town whose cityscape is dominated by pumpjacks (*Illustration 1*). The influx of prospectors and oil companies has attracted a number of other industries—diners and restaurants, hotels and boarding homes, transportation services, oil well supply stores, hardware stores, barber shops, and so on, highlighting that numerous small businesses depend on oil despite not trading in oil.

While these various ventures touch on the entrepreneurial impetus driving the expansion of the United States, the movie addresses a few characteristics of entrepreneurship in Big John and Square John’s story. First, business scholars have acknowledged the “systemic relationship between success and failure” in entrepreneurial ventures, which, ideally, leads to “falling forward”—that one learns from failures and turns them into success (what has since become the catchy mantra of “fail fast, fail often”).¹⁴ Despite their experience, the two wildcatters do not strike luck (or, rather, oil) right away, but need several attempts (and illegal and indecent measures) to find an oil well. McMasters builds an empire, while Sand comes to understand that money cannot buy the one thing he really desires (the love of the woman McMasters has married), turning his business ventures into distractions from the realities of life rather than something close to his heart. Second, when the two Johns lack funds and tell the owner of an oil-drilling supply store about how much money the (yet-to-be-found) well would yield, he gives them the tools and equipment required for drilling in exchange for a share in the well, speculating on a yet-to-materialize payout. Although



Illustration 1: Burk Burnett, Texas, is a bustling oil town.

Frame capture from *Boom Town*. *Boom Town* © MGM, 1940. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

the scene is played for laughs by ridiculing the store owner and his good faith spurred by his greed and emphasizes Big John and Square John’s skills in manipulating people, it also demonstrates that for every business venture, as Frank Knight claimed as early as 1921, “the profit is in the future and uncertain when the decision is made and hence it is the prospect or estimated probability of profit” that provides the basis of entrepreneurial decision-making and stimulates entrepreneurial risk-taking.¹⁵ Finally, the two Johns never seem to become satisfied with their successes, moving through America and even foreign lands searching for oil.¹⁶ They are what Mike Wright, Ken Robbie, and Christine Ennew have called serial entrepreneurs—“entrepreneurs who exit one venture before entering into a subsequent one.”¹⁷ In *Boom Town*, the concomitant constant changes to the two Johns’ lives result from their fascination with searching for oil rather than enjoying the “good life” (that is, at least in McMasters’ case) and reflect America’s need for continual renewal, embodying Turnerian discourse. In his oft-quoted essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner identified the nation’s “perennial rebirth” as

concomitant with its territorial expansion and industrial progress.¹⁸ He singled out the industrial-style entrepreneur, “those preeminent captains of industry,” as playing a significant role in generating a “magnitude of social achievement.”¹⁹

Maybe most interestingly from today’s perspective, when McMasters stands trial for forming a monopoly and thus breaking anti-trust laws at the end of the movie, Sand pleads that what McMasters did was in the best interest of America, for he was “trying to save the natural resources of the country” by planning for long-term rather than short-term profits. After all, “if we keep taking it out at the rate we’re going, before long, there won’t be any left in the good-old U.S.A. There won’t be any left for him or men like him to break up into lube and fuel and gasoline so that people can get their stuff moved around in trucks, so that you can light furnaces and homes and schoolhouses.”²⁰ Despite acknowledging the scarcity of oil, the movie concludes by celebrating oil—and the men who prospect and extract it—as the glue holding the nation together, highlighted by a closing shot of an army of oil rigs (*Illustration 2*).



Illustration 2: The oil rigs point toward the future of the United States.

Frame capture from *Boom Town*. *Boom Town* © MGM, 1940. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

Serena (2014) tells a story that revolves around the extraction of another natural resource: timber. The movie begins in the Smoky Mountains in the year 1929. Shots emphasizing the natural beauty and natural abundance, but also mystery, of the region open the film (**Illustration 3**). The seemingly infinite supply of timber has attracted George Pemberton (Bradley Cooper), and he has built a lumber empire. Filmed in 2012 and released in 2014, the movie's representation of an extractive industry cannot be disentangled from the environmental catastrophe that we have been witnessing unfold in our everyday lifeworlds. Jennifer Peterson has called this particular cinematic experience the "Anthropocene viewing condition," as "images of nature—particularly moving images of natures past—resonate with present and future environmental loss."²¹ While the trees that Pemberton's company removes from the region are today protected in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, it is to a large extent young forest that has replaced the old-growth forest that was lost to extensive logging in the early twentieth century—estimates suggest that between 1901 and 1939, lumber companies extracted 1.5 billion board feet of lumber (since these were mainly large, old trees, that would be between 1.5 and 3 million trees) from the Smoky Mountains.²²



Illustration 3: The Smoky Mountains are characterized by mystery and natural abundance.

Frame captures from *Serena*. *Serena* © Magnolia Pictures, 2015. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

This dimension of the movie becomes all the more apparent when Pemberton meets a banker and hears that "Congress is creating a national park in Carolina." Pemberton reacts in a snotty fashion: "Well, the park may come. By the time the government takes the land, there won't be a tree standing."²³ Indeed, historically, as Steve Cotham has explained, "over 60 percent of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park had been logged by 1940, when the park was dedicated."²⁴ Some time later in

the movie, officials present their arguments why the region should be transformed into a national park in a public hearing. Pemberton asks, “What about the jobs, Sheriff? These men need to work, don’t they? The logging camps bring in railroads, electric lines—the place has never had them before. We’re bringing progress to Carolina.” The Sheriff (Toby Jones) counters, “Progress? Progress for whom, Mr. Pemberton? All the profits are going north.” Pemberton responds, “Every logger . . . wants . . . freedom. The freedom to work hard and to better himself. That’s what this country is supposed to be.”²⁵ While Pemberton draws on the American myths of freedom, the land of opportunity, and self-reliance in this exchange, the scene also highlights the Smoky Mountains as what Macarena Gómez-Barris has called an “extractive zone.” In her eponymous book, Gómez-Barris focuses on the “successive march of colonial and neocolonial actors operating in relation to South America as if it were an extractible continent.”²⁶ In *Serena*, the Smoky Mountains become such an extractive zone, as northern money exploits the workforce and “cheap nature” of the region²⁷—something that monied interests were also doing in subsurface Appalachia.²⁸ Admittedly, equating South America with any region in the U.S. is problematic; however, the Anthropocene viewing condition transports these images of past exploitation to the present (and near future) and thus evokes “the rise of extreme extractive industries such [as] hydrofracturing, deep sea oil drilling, mountaintop coal removal, and tar sand oil extraction,” which “are bringing forms of environmental destruction heretofore confined to the Global South home to populations in the North.”²⁹ In so doing, the Anthropocene viewing condition draws viewers’ awareness to the global entanglements of capitalist practices. However, we do not mean to suggest that *Serena* was outright critical of the extractive industries and the carbon-based capitalist system that both fuels them and is fueled by them. After all, the story’s progress is often uncritically driven by automobiles moving through the Smoky Mountains, while the film’s production was happy to exploit tax incentives offered by the Czech Republic for filming there rather than in the U.S., highlighting how the film industry is not just a capitalist enterprise intent on maximizing profits (granted, the movie flopped) while not adequately contributing to the larger society (i.e., paying taxes to an extent that everybody else does).

As a final example, the Netflix miniseries *Self Made* (2020) tackles the entrepreneurial story of Madam C. J. Walker (Octavia Spencer). Named Sarah Breedlove upon her birth, Walker was the first child in her Louisiana family to be born into freedom. However, beyond a few references, the miniseries is not interested in the first forty years of Walker’s life, echoing the general perception that “for the first forty years of her life, Madam C. J. Walker lived, like most black women born and raised in the years after the end of slavery, as an anonymous figure . . . in the midst of a nation that restrained her freedom of movement, limited her educational opportunities

and wages, and denied her the full privileges of citizenship.”³⁰ The series addresses these shackles imposed upon Walker when she mentions early on that it “seems like I was born to struggle,” which provides the narrative impulse for the rest of the miniseries.³¹ Besides racism, Walker faces domestic abuse, toxic masculinity, and colorism, before starting to develop her hair care products. However, as her empire starts to grow, critical voices emerge from within the Black community, too. For example, Booker T. Washington (Roger Guenveur Smith)—though himself an accommodationist and coded in uncomfortably colorist terms in the series—calls her out for building a business on Black women’s attempts to conform to White ideals: “a trivial company that shames Negroes into Eurocentric standards of beauty.” However, she protests, “I have no interest in making colored women look white. I want us to feel beautiful, too.” When she stresses that her female employees earn much more than Black women in other jobs, Washington explains, “How is America going to take us seriously if we allow our women to surpass us?”³²

The miniseries thus highlights the intersectional forces of opposition Walker has to face: not only her skin color and her being a woman, but a Black woman coming from a poor background (“Even in your Sunday best, you look like you just stepped off the plantation,” says her much lighter-skinned competitor Addie Munroe—loosely based on the historical Annie Turnbo Malone—at one point³³). Despite acknowledging the various obstacles that Walker has to confront, the miniseries subscribes to the idea “that the opportunity for material attainment and spiritual fulfillment is every individual’s birthright and is within each person’s power,” as Julie Levinson describes the American myth of success.³⁴ After all, Walker’s material success is only part of the equation, as she becomes a “philanthropist and patron of the arts,” as the epilogue explains,³⁵ while her success—reflected in her move from the poor districts of St. Louis to her becoming John D. Rockefeller’s neighbor in upstate New York—is anchored in Black history, for, as she explains in the first episode, “hair is our heritage.”³⁶

All of these stories attest to the cultural valence and power of entrepreneurship, which is entangled with ideas surrounding the American Dream, America as the “land of opportunities,” and the American myth of success—as well as critical inquiries into these American myths. These cultural myths seek to establish and maintain the (purportedly) shared identity of the American nation. Through these cultural myths, Americans make sense of their cultural memories in order to tackle everyday life in the present, and possibly to shape their future(s).

Historically, European colonial ventures begot the system today known as “capitalism” (or early capitalism led to these ventures—whichever way one might want to look at this issue). Early entrepreneurship informed the Spanish conquest of South

America and the Caribbean decades before the British started their colonial forays in the New World, most of which were business ventures; they were prototypical forms of what nowadays is called venture capitalism. One need only take a look at some key documents of colonial times and how they advertise the New World. For example, while John Smith's *General History* (1624) sketches the trials and tribulations of living on the other side of the Atlantic, it also includes catalogs of the "many excellent vegetables, and living Creatures" found in Virginia, which were meant to attract workers and investors alike. After all, "no place is more convenient for pleasure, profit, and mans sustenance" than Virginia. Although "all the Countrey is overgrown with trees," Smith believed that it "would soone be amended by good husbandry."³⁷ Connecting this American narrative of "civilizing" the "wilderness" more explicitly to entrepreneurship, John Frederick Martin has convincingly shown that "to develop the wilderness" meant "to rely on entrepreneurs."³⁸ Establishing towns and other types of settlements in the New World were, as Martin demonstrates in *Profits in the Wilderness* (1991), profit-oriented projects. On a more general level, scholars such as Edwin Perkins have suggested that "colonial society reflects a culture permeated with market values and capitalist principles." More importantly, maybe, "most occupational categories in colonial societies qualify as legitimate antecedents of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur."³⁹ A characteristically bombastic History Channel docuseries that celebrates American exceptionalism has dubbed these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century entrepreneurs "the men who built America." The series suggests that entrepreneurs such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie created modern-day America between the Civil War and World War I, as their "insight, innovation, and ingenuity . . . change[d] history, propelling the United States of America to greatness." In a spiffy and characteristically hyperbolic soundbite, future "dealmaker-in-chief" Donald Trump takes this idea even a step further, claiming that "in that fifty-year period . . . we built the world."⁴⁰

But this entrepreneurial mindset is also reflected in the foundational framework of the United States. After all, the Declaration of Independence pronounces "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" three of the "unalienable Rights" that "all men" have. The connection between liberty and the pursuit of happiness is reflected in statements such as President Calvin Coolidge's famous (yet often misquoted) assertion that "the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing, and prospering in the world."⁴¹

Consequently, the four essays collected in this issue speak to different dimensions of the American entrepreneurial spirit, both embodied by historical figures and depicted in fictional representations. Heinz Tschachler's article explores the sources of George Washington's wealth, delineating three income streams that were partic-

ularly important. First, his career as a land surveyor and his experience on the Virginia frontier prepared him for becoming a successful land speculator. Second, being part of an emerging New World aristocracy allowed Washington to inherit money and generate income through a variety of upper-class connections and enslaved labor. Third, in his later years, Washington became an intrepid investor and entrepreneur who nevertheless had to contend with one of the many specters that haunt speculative ventures: debt.

In the second article, Stefan Rabitsch continues the discussion of the value of landed property. Zooming in on the hit television series *Yellowstone* (Paramount, 2018–), Rabitsch examines how settler colonialism’s imprint on land ownership, land development, and land use in the Trans-Mississippi West has usually favored big capital and conspicuous consumption. A postwestern text, Rabitsch argues, the series is an entrepreneurial drama that confronts the necrotic logic undergirding capitalism’s workings in the West as a “entrepreneurial habitat.” Concluding on a reading of Joseph Schumpeter’s definition of entrepreneurialism as pathogenic, this settler-colonialist heritage can only ever produce formations of violence, be they physical, psychological, epistemic, symbolic, and/or ecological.

Kelly Payne and Janel Simons return to a historical figure, progressive reformer Frances Willard. Using the bicycle as a symbol of reform and rooted in Christian values, Willard, they argue, embodies the coalescence of social innovation and female entrepreneurialism in the late nineteenth century. Deploying both the bicycle and entrepreneurialism as icons of (proto-)feminist activism, Willard paved the path for later developments in social entrepreneurship.

Michael Fuchs, finally, examines the serial cycle of extinction, de-extinction, re-extinction, and de-extinction as a tool for continually generating income and seemingly limitless growth. Focusing on the videogame *Jurassic Park Evolution* (Frontier Developments, 2018), Fuchs demonstrates that de-extinction may promise a (partial) solution to the extinction crisis by allowing humankind to control both life and death but cautions against the potential capitalist exploitation of such a (bio)technology, as de-extinction may lead to the increase of extinction, as resurrected species can be patented and sold.

Max Lerner asserted that “every tribe needs its totem and its fetish,” which are central elements to forge cultural identities.⁴² While Lerner went on to declare the Constitution the totem and fetish of the American people, it is but one American icon that forms “part of the ongoing effort to maintain a unified imagined community.”⁴³ As both the examples discussed earlier in this editorial and the articles included in this issue illustrate, in the pantheon of American icons, the entrepreneur is an important cultural archetype that reflects the zeitgeist. Accordingly, fears,

anxieties, desires, and wishes may be projected onto the entrepreneur; the figure of the entrepreneur—and interpretations of the entrepreneur as a hero or villain—is thus a cultural barometer that provides insight into the American psyche.

Stefan Rabitsch & Michael Fuchs

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- 11 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 347.
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- 13 *Boom Town*, dir. Jack Conway (Beverly Hills: MGM, 1940).

- 14 Rita Gunther McGrath, “Falling Forward: Real Options Reasoning and Entrepreneurial Failure,” *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 1 (1999): 13, DOI: [10.2307/259034](https://doi.org/10.2307/259034).
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George Washington, the Godfather of American Entrepreneurism

Heinz Tschachler

Abstract

Among all U.S. presidents, George Washington still ranks as the wealthiest. By the time of his death, he owned more than 52,000 acres, which secured his position among the top-ranked land-holding gentry of his day. In Washington's America, secured property was one of the most potent and consequential ideals, much as it also was a dominant cultural investment, with property figuring as "a matter of progress," in the words of a British social philosopher. In eighteenth-century America, individual property was related to working one's own land, which became the basis of civic virtue, conveying status and authority. At Mount Vernon, Washington was a farmer, not a planter, and a scientific farmer at that. Farming was not the easiest route to riches, though, and Mount Vernon's glorified façade of wealth and grandeur only covered up an operation that was, at best, only marginally profitable. Over the years, therefore, Washington became an intrepid figure in financial investment and risky enterprise, not the least of which was the development of the new national capital, whose location on the Potomac had been decided upon in June 1790. With his involvement in the capital venture, Washington fashioned for himself a new mode of economic selfhood and familial belonging that was keyed to the emerging market economy. He became what Joseph A. Schumpeter in 1911 described as a "risk-taker," America's "first commercial man" (President Calvin Coolidge in 1932), and, finally, the "godfather of American entrepreneurism" (historian Richard Norton Smith in 1993).

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George Washington, the Godfather of American Entrepreneurism

Heinz Tschachler

Among all the 46 U.S. presidents, George Washington still ranks first as the wealthiest of all. Donald Trump might trump him, but so far he's refused to fully disclose his income tax return, and until he's done so, we'll keep Washington in first place. However, it was not the presidential salary that established this claim. The presidential salary is not going to make anyone rich. According to a law that the U.S. Congress passed on August 31, 1789, the annual salary of the president was set at \$25,000 (the Secretary of the Treasury's, who then was Alexander Hamilton, was set at \$3,500). This was not bad, considering that a pound of butter then cost 13 cents. But salaries notwithstanding, a number of America's presidents, the Founders included, had plenty of their own. CNBC's John W. Schoen in August 2016 estimated the wealth of the Chief Executives during their terms of office, citing 10 with the most assets:

1. George Washington (\$525 million)
2. Thomas Jefferson (\$212 million)
3. Theodore Roosevelt (\$125 million)
4. Andrew Jackson (\$119 million)
5. James Madison (\$101 million)
6. Lyndon B. Johnson (\$98 million)
7. Herbert Hoover (\$75 million)
8. Bill Clinton (\$75 million)
9. Franklin D. Roosevelt (\$60 million)
10. John F. Kennedy (\$1 billion, shared through a trust with the rest of the family)¹

George Washington may have won the competition among the nation's chief executives hands down, but the question remains what the claim of him as the rich-

est U.S. president ever, or at least as the wealthiest American of his time, is based on. Altogether, we can identify three tributaries to Washington's wealth. Most of it can be traced to his success as a land speculator. His activities as a landowner and gentleman farmer likewise added to his wealth. Finally, economic prosperity accrued from Washington's success as an investor and entrepreneur.

Land Speculator

As the biographer James T. Flexner concluded, "In no other direction did Washington demonstrate such acquisitiveness as in his quest for the ownership of land."² Acquiring land was an enterprise that grew out of Washington's early career as land surveyor and his firsthand experience of the frontier country gained during the French and Indian War (1754–63). Young Washington was so adept at surveying that he could charge almost twice the going rate (£2 3s instead of £1 11s 3d, for surveying less than 1,000 acres of frontier land). He was usually paid in handfuls of cash or tobacco notes—the bulk of which he saved, only to invest it in land later.³ Washington's first land purchase was of almost 1,500 wilderness acres on Bullskin Creek in Frederick County, Virginia, in 1752, when he was a mere twenty years old. In the same year, he inherited an interest in the Mount Vernon family domain, which increased his holdings to over 4,000 acres.

Eventually, Washington built the Mount Vernon estate to more than 7,000 acres, with a workforce of almost three hundred slaves (about one third of whom he owned, the remainder rented from neighbors). He also kept adding to his land holdings for the rest of his life, particularly along the western frontier he knew from his soldiering days. He eventually secured title to more than 23,000 acres in what would become West Virginia. By the time of his death, Washington owned more than 52,000 acres sprinkled from New York in the north, through Pennsylvania and Maryland, to Virginia in the south, and Kentucky and the Ohio Valley in the west, something above eighty-one square miles.⁴ All those acres not only secured Washington's position among the top-ranked land-holding gentry but, following Michael Klepper and Robert Gunther, also translated into wealth that put him at number fifty-nine in the list of the top 100 wealthy Americans through the ages (the list is headed by John D. Rockefeller, Sr., the oil-refining magnate, and Cornelius Vanderbilt, the shipping mogul and railroad builder).⁵ Most importantly, all those acres testify to Washington's own conviction that land was the ultimate possession, far more important than money. "Money," he wrote to his stepson John Parke Custis at the height of the War of Independence, "will melt like Snow before a hot Sun [but] Lands are permanent, *rising fast in value*."⁶

In 1799, the year of his death, Washington's estate was pegged at \$780,000 (the equivalent of anything between \$20 million and \$80 million in today's money).⁷ But

this is an estimate. In a schedule of property that accompanied his twenty-eight-page handwritten will, Washington lists the properties and holdings he wished to be sold and what he thought they were worth. There was real estate from Virginia to the Ohio Valley to New York to the District of Columbia, \$35,000 worth of shares and bonds, as well as Mount Vernon livestock. The total was \$530,000—an enormous sum at the time (the equivalent of \$14 million to \$55 million in today’s money). But this figure is only part of the first president’s financial snapshot. There is no valuation of the 7,000-plus acres Mount Vernon estate, which was divided among Washington’s relatives, or the value of his 124 slaves, to be freed following his wife’s death (Martha Washington died in 1802). Since the estate was not in dispute and there were no taxes to be levied on it, his executors were under no obligation to assign market values. So, included in the overall figure of \$780,000 are Washington’s own appraisal of what his holdings would fetch (\$530,000) plus an additional, unverifiable figure of \$250,000, computed by historians.⁸

Among Washington’s possessions, the single most valuable one was Mount Vernon. The market value of the estate has been estimated at \$250,000 (\$5 million to \$11 million in today’s money), but its real value shows in the relative “prestige value” of Washington’s wealth compared with the net worth of average Americans of the era. The relative “prestige value,” which includes all of Washington’s properties and holdings, amounts to \$429 million in today’s money, a figure that reflects the serious wealth that the nation’s first president had accumulated. The data is mind-boggling: at the time of his death, Washington’s estate was equivalent in value to almost one-fifth of one percent—0.19 percent—of the entire nation’s \$411 million GDP. If Washington were living today and boasted a fortune worth 0.19 percent of the nation’s approximately \$20.15 trillion 2018 GDP, he would be worth \$9.4 to \$20 billion, taking thirty-fifth place in the *Forbes* list of seriously wealthy Americans, just about equaling Rupert Murdoch and family, and way above the *Forbes* 400 members’ average net worth of \$7.4 billion. George Washington would be in rich company.⁹

However, Washington was not born to the imperial purple, and he also was not by birth a member of the first families of Virginia, the fabled Virginia gentry. He was a true self-made man, a “crafty and diligent entrepreneur,” in Edward Lengel’s words.¹⁰ As I have noted above, Washington was tremendously successful as a land speculator, a most profitable business line then. He added to his wealth when, after the death of his half-brother Lawrence, he inherited an interest in the Mount Vernon family domain. Family connections too set him up on the road to fame and fortune. Lawrence had married into the Fairfax clan, one of Virginia’s richest and most influential families. In 1752 George Washington joined the Masonic Lodge in Fredericksburg, Virginia—later renamed “Frederickburg Lodge No. 4”¹¹—in those days one of the best ways to meet the right folks. Seven years later he married Martha Dandridge Custis,

the widow of a well-heeled gentleman planter, and one of the wealthiest women in Virginia. Martha brought to the marriage some 18,000 acres of prime Virginia land, plus assets amounting to some £10,000 (just under \$2 million in today's money), a bounty that by law passed into her husband's care, transforming Washington from being a comfortably well-off country gentleman into one of Virginia's wealthiest landowners.¹²

At Mount Vernon, Washington lived the life of a true Virginia gentleman, a proud member of the colony's ruling caste. Washington Irving in his mid-nineteenth-century biography invites us to consider the awe-inspiring effect produced by "Washington's noble person and demeanor, his consummate horsemanship, the admirable horses he was accustomed to ride, and the aristocratical style of his equipments." In a footnote to the passage, Irving offers a telling description of the "aristocratical order for clothes" Washington had sent to Robert Cary, his London correspondent:

2 complete livery suits for servants; with a spare cloak, all other necessary trimmings for two suits more. I would have you choose the livery by our arms, only as the firded [sic] of the arms is white, I think the clothes had better not be quite so, but nearly like the inclosed. The trimmings and facings of scarlet, and a scarlet waistcoat. If livery lace is not quite disused, I should be glad to have the cloaks laced.

1 set of horse furniture, with livery lace, with the Washington crest on the housings, &c. The cloak to be of the same piece and color of the clothes.

3 gold and scarlet sword-knobs. 3 silver and blue do. 1 fashionable gold-laced hat.¹³

The order is dated December 1755. But keeping up with the Joneses, in Washington's case the Fairfaxes, Carters, and Robinsons of Virginia, had its price. Washington's purchases of outlandish, expensive fripperies from London simply was beyond his means. The London merchant bought Mount Vernon's tobacco crop and in return shipped exotic English goods, along with agricultural accessories like plows and grass seed to Virginia. On Washington's want list of June 6, 1768, for instance, was a "Charriot . . . made in the newest taste, handsome, genteel, and light . . . on the harness let my crest be engraved," along with ivory-handled sets, and a seven-and-a-half-foot tester bed with blue and white curtains to match the wallpaper.¹⁴

Landowner and Gentleman Farmer

When Washington sent his order to his London correspondent, the value for his tobacco crop was falling, and the luxuries were getting more and more expensive. He ended up owing Cary £800 (some \$160,000 in today's money) on the account, and the interest, at 5 percent, mounted. (It was only when his stepdaughter, Patsy Cus-

tis, died in 1773 and Washington received money from her estate that he was able to settle his debt with Cary.) What compounded Washington's financial difficulties were poor farming practices in America. In 1766, Washington therefore decided to opt out of tobacco production (the crop, which had been introduced to Virginia from South America as early as 1612, was extremely labor-intensive, hard on the land, and increasingly unprofitable) and diversify his production to wheat, corn, flax, and hemp, all of which could be sold domestically, thus allowing Washington to operate outside the colonial system.¹⁵

Washington detested (and feared) the colonial system. Just how much is evident from another detail of his life. When Washington came into possession of Mount Vernon, he had the main house's front changed. For as long as his half-brother Lawrence owned it, the front faced the Potomac River, which was then the gateway to England (and Lawrence, like most wealthy Virginians at the time, felt thoroughly English). When George Washington inherited the estate, he had the mansion's front face West, to the frontier, to where there was abundant land, in short, to America's future. As a landowner and gentleman farmer Washington introduced the mule to America (the first import was Royal Gift, sent by King Charles III of Spain); also on Washington's estate would be found cows, sheep, chickens, fish, and, not to forget, a most profitable distillery. The distillery was begun by the Scottish farmer James Anderson, Washington's enterprising estate manager, in the late 1790s. By 1799, Washington was one of America's largest producers of corn and rye whiskey, with an annual output of eleven thousand gallons and an annual excise tax amounting to \$332.64 (about \$7,000 in today's money). The distillery has been restored and whoever would like to see what Washington's whiskey probably tasted like can do so on the premises—at \$185 a pop.¹⁶

By his own definition, Washington was a farmer, not a planter, and a scientific farmer at that. Throughout his life, he sought the latest books on agriculture and husbandry, he corresponded with the leading agriculturalists of his day, he became an honorary member of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture in 1785, and in 1797 an honorary member of the English Board of Agriculture.¹⁷ Washington was horrified at American farming practices of the time, explaining to the English agriculturalist Arthur Young, "A piece of land is cut down and kept under constant cultivation, first in tobacco and then in Indian corn (two very exhausting plants), until it will yield scarcely anything . . . A second piece is cleared and treated in the same manner; then a third, and so on until probably there is but little more to clear." So what was the impoverished landowner to do? "Either to recover the land which he has ruined, to accomplish which he has perhaps neither the skill, the industry, nor the means; or to retire beyond the mountains; or to substitute quantity for quality, in order to raise something."¹⁸

In recent times, the image of Washington as a bold farmer-entrepreneur has often been lampooned, as in a cartoon speech balloon coming from his mouth saying, “I Grew Hemp!” There is stronger stuff, such as a 1994 painting by Alfred J. Quiroz. The artwork, which is titled *George Washington Inspects the Hemp Crop*, sets a happy Washington between a guffawing loudly laughing gentleman with a clay pipe and a grinning, corn-cob-pipe-puffing slave. It is apparent that the three men have indulged in the consumption of marijuana. The painting not only parodies the numerous representations of Washington as a gentleman farmer; its subversive scorn also targets representations of him as a tedious unsmiling prig. And, as someone under the influence, Washington appears utterly unheroic.¹⁹

In the last instance, Quiroz alerts us to a more sinister side to Washington’s role as a gentleman farmer. Like other such gentlemen, Thomas Jefferson included, George Washington was not particularly disturbed by the fact that he owed a good deal of his wealth to the exploitation of African Americans. As the historian Fritz Hirschfeld expounds, at Mount Vernon, slaves

plowed the fields, tended the crops, harvested the wheat and corn, dried the tobacco, cured the ham, picked the apples, built the barns, mended the fences, milked the cows, collected the eggs, operated the distillery, fished the Potomac, drained the swamps, herded the cattle, sheared the sheep, loaded the cargoes, and carried out the other menial tasks associated with the upkeep and operation of a large and mainly self-sufficient plantation—and it was the profit from their toil that resulted in the creation of the luxury and great beauty . . . that made George Washington’s ancestral home a magnificent showplace during much of his lifetime.²⁰

For an eighteenth-century gentleman farmer like Washington, it was also only natural to move into politics. Thanks to his connections, Washington was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1758. The assembly met in Williamsburg, Virginia’s capital, and Washington all of a sudden was at the center of the colony’s elite.²¹ Following the War of Independence, Washington was elected to the Continental Congress and, in 1789, he became the new nation’s first president. But as Washington prepared for his inauguration in New York City, then the nation’s capital, he had to borrow £100 at 6 percent interest from a friend to make the trip. The Mount Vernon agricultural enterprise was often mired in cash-flow problems. From his mid-life career as tobacco farmer onwards, Washington faced periods when debts mounted and his financial outlook lost its rosy glow.²²

George Washington was by no means the only Virginia landowner to discover that farming was not the easiest route to riches. In fact, all of these people were at once civic and acquisitive, men who were chronically cash poor because their speculation in land was done on credit and IOUs and warrants, not cash. They would therefore

ground personality in “real” values such as ownership of land, buildings, and other fixed goods, including “this species of property,” as slaves were commonly referred to. In each instance, however, what they owned were not merely *de facto* possessions, their use governed by informal customary rules, but *de jure* possessions over which they had documented claims.²³ Among the possessions over which owners in colonial Virginia had such claims, land had the most prestige by far. It is worth repeating what Washington wrote to John Parke Custis on May 26, 1778: “Lands are permanent, *rising fast in value.*”²⁴

What Washington does not mention in his letter is the rank and status that vast acreage bestowed in an aristocratic Virginia. In fact, land was the prerequisite to becoming a gentleman, and Washington had wanted to become one ever since childhood. Tellingly, as early as 1747 he copied out over a hundred maxims from *The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, a humorless guidebook of etiquette that traced its origins to a French Jesuit work of the sixteenth century.²⁵ Washington also knew (or at least felt) that in economic activities, landed property offered the greatest security by far and thus yielded the highest liquidity premium. His understanding of the importance of land cannot therefore be separated from an economic order that was no longer content with material production, reproduction, and consumption governed by mutually binding customary rules. The economic order that Washington knew based value on property that, because it was secured by documented claims, could be freely disposed of.

The system of private property, specified and quantified in legally binding contracts, goes back a long way, to the beginning of the Greek *polis* and, later, to the Roman *civitas*. Lucretius, writing in the first century BCE, repeats the conviction the Greek historian Thucydides had laid down in his history of the Peloponnesian War (431 BCE), that antedating the *polis* hereditary kingdoms prevailed, kingdoms that knew definite prerogatives but not property rights: “At length the leaders began to build cities . . . Afterwards wealth was introduced, and gold brought to light, which easily robbed the strong and beautiful of their honour.”²⁶ Cicero, too, maintained that private possessions “are not so by nature, but by . . . law, treaty, agreement, or lot.”²⁷ His *De Officiis*, written in 44 BCE, his last year alive, is also most explicit about the duties of political leaders concerning property rights: “He who administers the affairs of the state must take special care that every man be defended in the possession of *what rightfully belongs to him*, and that there be no encroachment on *private property* by public authority.”²⁸

What these classic sources reveal is that, historically, *de facto* possession, the basis of feudal relations in which customary rules govern its use, had given way to economic contracts, the basis of “ownership economics.”²⁹ The full conceptual sep-

aration of possession and ownership is crucial: property that is held *de jure* is private property over which owners have documented claims on the basis of which it can be sold, mortgaged, hypothecated, or loaned with a view of appropriate returns. As for landed property, it is necessary to work the land in order to secure one's property. Land held by documented claims thus may pass through the generations as the inheritance of the eldest son, as in England and, later, in the colonies of the American South, but it always entails economic activities that make their owners behave like debtors.³⁰

Washington dreaded debt, much as he also always insisted that every payment due him was promptly paid. Throughout his life he strained to keep the dreadful nightmare of being in debt from becoming reality for either himself or his country. To Herman Melville, who generally ranks among America's greatest writers, being in debt too was anathema. At the time, readers mostly paid no attention at all to his criticism of ownership economics, blinded as they must have been by the lure of tropical islands: "In a primitive society," Melville wrote in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), "the enjoyments of life, though few and simple, are spread over a great extent, and are unalloyed; but civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds a hundred evils in reserve." Among those "evils," which according to Melville undermine America's inherent egalitarianism, are "foreclosures of mortgages[,] . . . protested notes[,] . . . bills payable[,] . . . debtors' prisons[,] . . . or, to sum up all in one word—Money!"³¹ Henry David Thoreau, the *enfant terrible* of American letters, likewise had a profound distrust of a credit economy. In *Walden* (1854), which for all intents and purposes is still the best-known among his writings, he muses that an average house costs about eight hundred dollars, and what a waste of time to spend ten to fifteen years of one's life "to lay up this sum."³²

The sages of classical Greece would have laughed at Thoreau's idea of laying up money for fifteen years in order to buy a house; and, I suspect, they would rather be dead than enjoy the purportedly "unalloyed" pleasures of Polynesian life that Melville dreamed himself into. The Greeks had just gotten out of what had been "a primitive society," and so Hesiod, purportedly the first economist of the western world, admonished Perses to "hope no more / The willing bounty, nor the borrow'd store. / Insensate Perses! be the labours thine / Which the good gods to earthly man assign . . . Did exhortation move, thy thought should be / From debt releasement, days from hunger free."³³ Work was considered as the rich man's vademecum as early as the fifth century BCE: "From labour men returns of wealth behold, / Flocks in their fields, and in their coffers gold: / From labour shalt thou with the love be blest / Of men and gods; the slothful they detest."³⁴ While the Greek sage may have been too remote for Washington and his contemporaries, the Romans were not. In the writings of Titus Livius and Virgil, secured property such as land figures as the basis of wealth. And,

as in Hesiod, work, not idleness, figures as a key social value: “Thus rous’d by varied wants new arts arose, / And strenuous labour triumph’d at its close.”³⁵ The triumph of work, on the basis of private property, marks the close of the Age of Iron, not of the age of Protestantism, characterized, according to Max Weber, by a work ethos that sees material success as an indication of the salvation of one’s soul and that is still held dear today.³⁶

Weber’s thesis does little to account for the Catholic Medicis or the Fuggers of Augsburg, devout Catholics too. Insisting on the Calvinistic roots of entrepreneurialism may be good to explain Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1720), possibly also Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (1732–58), with such wisdoms as, “A penny saved is a penny earned” or “Industry pays debts,” though not his *Autobiography*, in which the sage discloses that, although brought up a Presbyterian, he “early absented [himself] from the Public Assemblies of the Sect, Sunday being [his] Studying-Day.”³⁷ Calvinism, however, does duty for Horatio Alger’s from-rags-to-riches sagas (“the dream of a sick America,” as Henry Mille bitterly quipped).

America’s Founders were *not* radical or even pious disciples of John Calvin; they shuddered at the thought that a jealous and wrathful God left no room for free agency. Moreover, they found the call for worldly asceticism as repulsive as the idea of relentless activity in order to increase the glory of God. The founders, Gregg Frazer argues, were “theistic rationalists,” who believed in God’s providential interventions, the efficacy of prayer, but not much else.³⁸ Most of them at least nominally belonged to established churches. George Washington, for instance, was Episcopalian. American Episcopalianism is an offshoot of English Anglicanism. A prominent member of the Anglican Church (more precisely, its latitudinarian or unitarian branch) was the philosopher John Locke. God was still important to him, and so in *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Locke wrote that “God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labour.” The quotation is from a chapter in the Second Treatise titled “Of Property,” from which we also learn that among all the labors that the “penury” of the human condition requires, working the land is the privileged one: “As much land as man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property.”³⁹ More importantly, Locke defines the right to property as a premier human right, an “original law of nature.”⁴⁰

But what good is property if it is not guaranteed, secured by law? As Locke goes on to say, “established laws of liberty to secure protection and encouragement to the honest industry of mankind” are the trademark of a “wise and godlike” ruler.⁴¹ Phrased differently, laws that regulate the right of property and the possession of land are essential. Only titled property, Locke writes in a later chapter, is secure:

The supreme power cannot take from any man part of his property without his own consent; for the preservation of property being the end of government and that for which men enter into society, it necessarily supposes and requires that the people should have property, without which they must be supposed to lose that, by entering into society, which was the end for which they entered into it—too gross an absurdity for any man to own. Men, therefore, in society having property, they have such *rights to the goods which by the law of the community are theirs, that nobody hath a right to take their substance or any part of it from them without their own consent.*⁴²

For Washington, the right to property was both a matter of principle and integral to a stable civil society. Protecting the right to property was one of the reasons the War of Independence was fought, especially after the British had begun to attack the colonists' private property.⁴³ Locke's words on the right to property are echoed in the Declaration of Independence of 1776 (where they appear as the right to the "pursuit of happiness," thus not only sanctifying private property rights but, following Larry Schweikart and Lynn P. Doti, also creating "a political and legal climate conducive to economic risk taking").⁴⁴ Locke's words on the right to property also figure prominently in the 5th Amendment to the United States Constitution. Ratified as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791, it offers protection against "unwarranted seizure."⁴⁵

All this goes to say that in eighteenth-century America, secured property was one of the most potent and consequential ideals, much as it also was a dominant cultural investment and ideological cornerstone of the new nation. "Property is a matter of progress," wrote the British social philosopher Adam Ferguson in 1767, "and the industry by which it is gained, or improved . . . is in reality a principal distinction of nations in the advanced state of mechanic and commercial acts."⁴⁶ Adam Smith agreed, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), that individual property was the core difference between civilized societies and savage ones. In eighteenth-century America, individual property was related to working one's own land, which became the basis of civic virtue, conveying status and authority. Furious that Britain was taxing the colonies without their consent, Washington had urged resistance two years before independence was declared: "No power upon earth can compel us to do otherwise," he wrote to Bryan Fairfax in August 1774, "till they have first reduced us to the most abject state of Slavery, that was ever designed for Mankind."⁴⁷

In the end, however, Washington knew that Mount Vernon's glorified façade of wealth and grandeur only covered up an operation that was, at best, only marginally profitable. What he, like other landowners of his time, had to acquaint himself with was the process of selling land (or slaves) for the express purpose of repaying his debts. But as the economists Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger have shown, success in economic activity comes only when even as a debtor a property owner

remains a net creditor by holding on to a surplus of assets over liabilities.⁴⁸ Washington was not always successful in this as a landowner and gentleman farmer. Small wonder, then, that over the years he became an intrepid figure in financial investment and risky enterprise, not the least of which was the development of the new national capital, whose location on the Potomac had been decided upon in June 1790. With his involvement in the capital venture, Washington fashioned for himself a new mode of economic selfhood and familial belonging, one that was keyed to the emerging market economy.

Entrepreneur and Investor

Whereas George Washington has often been lampooned as a gentleman farmer, no one to my knowledge has made the investor and entrepreneur the butt of his or her satiric wit. On the contrary, the image of him as an economic visionary has been part of the Washington legend from early on. Edward Savage's 1796 painting *The Washington Family* (Illustration 1) depicts a typical bourgeois household, dominated by a rigid order complete with hierarchized gender roles. Each family member is in his or her proper place, each performing a normative social role of early republican domestic life. There is Martha Washington, dressed in sartorial silk and brocade, together with the two grandchildren from her first marriage, and the liveried domestic servant, whose skin color captures the white supremacist underpinnings of society much as it indicates Washington's origin in Virginia's planter elite (the baroquish scene suggests Mount Vernon, though the Washingtons posed for Savage in New York). George Washington, the paterfamilias, is shown almost in life size (the painting measures 84 x 112in., i.e., 213 x 285cm). His general's uniform, the spurs on his boots and the set jaws dutifully evoke the revolutionary hero, while the black hat, dress sword, and the various papers on the table speak of "President Washington," ready to leave home at a moment's notice.⁴⁹

While the painting does represent the Washingtons as America's national family, the incarnation of Republican domestic life, it at the same time depicts the first "first family" as a family of economic visionaries. The group—the unnamed black slave excepted—are seated around a table on which is spread out Andrew Ellicott's plan of the new national capital. The scheme was highly controversial at the time. Federalists (including George Washington himself) embraced it, while economically conservative Republicans decried it as a swindle and a folly. Ellicott had adapted his plan from Pierre Charles L'Enfant's original street plan, adding embellishments and highlighting the more than 1,100 squares of purchasable property as investment opportunities. By having the Washingtons focus on Ellicott's plan, Savage represents them as a family of economic visionaries, a body of far-sighted schemers, with George Washington as the undisputed leader of the capital venture.⁵⁰ Seated in an ornate chair,



Illustration 1: Edward Savage, *The Washington Family*, 1796, oil on canvas (84 x 112 in.).

National Gallery of Arts, Washington, DC, Andrew W. Mellon Collection. This image is in public domain.

the Father of His Country has his left arm on a copy of the street plan, gazing into the future as if he were engaged in calculating forecasting, perhaps even envisioning “the grand avenue,” now known as Pennsylvania Avenue, the future location of the White House. Lest anyone missed the point, Savage’s composition even highlights the areas where the Washingtons had purchased investment properties in the 1790s: the silver pommel of George Washington’s sword hovers over one such location, while the tip of Martha Washington’s fan covers another one north of the Capitol, where the Washingtons in 1798 would buy two lots on which their contractors later built two townhouses.

Savage’s painting not only affirms the capital venture and its long-term viability. It also advances a new vision of property ownership, one that is keyed to the priorities of the emergent market economy, such as fungible properties like real estate, all volatile and fluid, held for exchange, sale, for mortgaging, for yielding appropriate returns. Volatility and fluidity, selling and mortgaging, waiting for returns—all these terms suggest “risk.” In his *Theory of Economic Development* (1911), the Austrian political economist Joseph A. Schumpeter described the entrepreneur as a “risk-taker,”

an innovator, a thinking force in business. Typically, an entrepreneur is not content with material reproduction; an entrepreneur does not save up. Nor is he necessarily an inventor according to Schumpeter. Implementing an innovative project, an entrepreneur wants to make a profit, and thus is willing to assume debts.⁵¹ Borrowing from Schumpeter, John Maynard Keynes in 1930 claimed that what drives an enterprise is not thrift but profit. Profit, represented in monetary terms, thus becomes the bridge between the present and the future.⁵²

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “entrepreneur” derives from the French word *entreprendre*, to undertake. It originally referred to a director or manager of a musical institution or someone who gets up entertainment. In political economics, an “entrepreneur” is “a person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks.” The word “entrepreneur” was introduced into economics by the Irish-born Parisian banker Richard Cantillon, whose *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général* (1755) is widely considered the first great systematic work of economics. The *Essai* outlines how imbalances in trade affected domestic prices through international movements of bullion (gold and silver) and shows how an increase in the circulation of money affects some parts of the economy before others (what is still known as the “Cantillon effect”). Cantillon also was a partner of the Scottish adventurer John Law’s infamous Louisiana settlement but later had his doubts about the system and speculated against the French currency on the foreign exchanges. The *Essai*, written in the 1720s (but only published in 1755), still provides the best critique of Law’s monetary experiment, whose end has come to be known as “The Great Mississippi Bubble,” one of the many investment bubbles in what Daniel Defoe called a “projecting age.”⁵³

I do not know whether the German economist and sociologist Werner Sombart ever read Cantillon’s *Essai*. I do know, however, that in the late 1800s, Sombart traveled to the U.S. to determine why American workers reject socialism. This is what Sombart found:

For the average American being successful means first and foremost becoming rich. This explains why that restless striving, which we recognized as an essential part of the American national character, is applied before all else to economic life. In America the best and most energetic people apply themselves to financial careers, whereas in Europe they go into politics. In the mass public an excessive valuation of economic matters develops for the same reason, namely because people believe that in this sphere they can most easily reach the goal for which they strive.

Most importantly, Sombart added that “the greater intensity put into his labor by the American worker is only the extension of his fundamentally capitalist disposi-

tion.”⁵⁴ An interesting idea, but what Sombart didn’t see was that the differences between American and European workers was not just the Americans’ desire to get rich, but the opportunity to actually do so by enterprise instead of muddling along with government work as in Europe. Sombart also erroneously believed that this “fundamentally capitalist disposition” would soon disappear, along with all other factors preventing socialism.

To return to George Washington. In 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence, the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. For Smith, altruistic moments were a thin reed on which to hang hopes of civilized behavior from people. Nor could Smith comprehend a society without property—not even in the “early and rude state,” as in a tribal “nation of hunters.” What he regards as property at a more advanced stage is, therefore, merely transformed from “common property” to individual or “private property.” For Smith, profit and rent of land are the specific characteristics of private property and emerge as new sources of income along with wages, the latter assumed as a reproduction wage that has always existed.⁵⁵

The Wealth of Nations would become a world bestseller. George Washington likewise bought—and carefully studied—Adam Smith’s work, finding his own experience of self-interest and property ownership corroborated.⁵⁶ As the bicentennial of Washington’s birth was approaching, President Calvin Coolidge called him America’s “first commercial man.”⁵⁷ Given the mood of the time, this does not come as a surprise. As Coolidge had said in a 1925 address, “the business of America is business.”⁵⁸ President Coolidge was not the only prominent American to look toward George Washington as a model entrepreneur. In a similar vein, the historian Claude Gernade Bowers, who in the 1930s would become Franklin D. Roosevelt’s minister to Spain, describes Washington as “a rather hard businessman, a forerunner of the modern captain of industry.”⁵⁹

William E. Woodward, author and member of the Business Advisory Council of the U.S. Department of Commerce, even recast the adult Washington in the image of a pragmatic Wall Street tycoon of the 1920s: “He had no religious feeling himself, but thought religion was a good thing for other people—especially for the common people. Anyone who understands American life will recognize the modern captain-of-industry attitude in this point of view.”⁶⁰ The summary by art historian Karal Ann Marling seems apt: “The George Washington of the 1920s was a peculiar mixture of solid, Republican business acumen and petty Rotarian vice,” a Babbitt from the colonial past.⁶¹

Conclusion

At the end of the day, we can say that George Washington's wealth came from three sources. Most of it can be traced to his success as a land speculator, an enterprise that grew out of his early career as land surveyor and his firsthand experience of the frontier country. He added to his wealth through inheritance, family connections, his half-brother Lawrence's marriage into the Fairfax clan, his membership in a prestigious Masonic Lodge and, finally, through his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis, the widow of a wealthy gentleman planter. George Washington, too, was a gentleman farmer, whose lavish lifestyle at Mount Vernon was, however, largely owed to the toil of slaves. Even so, Washington found it increasingly difficult to maintain Mount Vernon as a profitable operation. Over the years, therefore, he became an intrepid figure in financial investment and risky enterprise. Washington's genius as an investor and entrepreneur was the third pillar to his wealth, an image that was first enshrined in Savage's painting *The Washington Family*, which in an exemplary way represents the Washingtons as a family of economic visionaries, with George Washington as the undisputed leader of the capital venture—a proto-CEO. The painting was done in 1796, three years before Washington's death. In more general terms, therefore, the final years of America's first president mark the moment when the traditional values of Virginia aristocracy and wealth rooted in land gave way to a speculative capitalist economy dominated by risk-taking entrepreneurs, epitomized later in Theodore Dreiser's corrupt fictional financier, Frank Cowperwood.

Today, Washington's image represents a paradox, juxtaposing an icon embodying America's foundational virtues of piety, honesty, and humility with an increasingly exploited symbol that has been emptied of value by overuse. This exploitation, however, did not gain momentum until the second half of the twentieth century. For the eighteenth, nineteenth, and much of the twentieth century, Washington's image evoked pictures of aristocracy, domestic virtue, and good business sense.⁶² Placing George Washington within a context of commerce was always done from ample biographical evidence. Washington was a punctilious businessman and landowner, a man who loved to count, measure and weigh his possessions. Biographer William E. Woodward calls him “a thing man not an idea man,” for Washington was deeply interested in the hows but not the whys of the world.⁶³ The Father of His Country and the nation's first president did not speak a foreign language, did not appreciate art, and did not read for pleasure. When he died, his library contained almost 900 volumes, but the vast majority of these were concerned with agricultural or commercial matters. (Washington also subscribed to Arthur Young's *Annals of Agriculture*, to which George III, the English king, contributed under the pseudonym Ralph Robinson, and in whose pages the British prime minister William Pitt discoursed on turnips and deep plowing.) As a boy, Washington often used his surveying skills as a party trick—after

dinner, young George would survey the turnip patch for the Washingtons' guests. His mind was concerned with the prosaic details of business. Halsted Ritter, a U.S. District Judge appointed by President Coolidge, termed him the "prototype of the modern man of business."⁶⁴ And, it should be added, a successful one at that. When all is said and done, therefore, it seems entirely fitting that the United States placed a portrait of the "godfather of American entrepreneurship" (the phrase belongs to Richard Norton Smith⁶⁵) on its most common paper currency, the one-dollar bill, thus enthroning him as the nation's personification of late capitalism.

Notes

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- 7 I have drawn here and elsewhere on Samuel H. Williamson's very helpful online device at *MeasuringWorth*, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.
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- 16 Allison Aubrey, "Drinking Whiskey in the Spirit of George Washington," *National Public Radio*, October 22, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2011/10/22/141589394/>

drinking-whiskey-in-the-spirit-of-george-washington.

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- 19 For an illustration and further description, see Mark E. Thistlethwaite, “Hero, Celebrity, and Cliché: The Modern and Postmodern Image of George Washington,” in *George Washington: American Symbol*, ed. Barbara J. Mitnick (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 148.
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- 28 Cicero, *Cicero’s Masterpieces*, Book 2, ch. 21, 155–56.
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- 57 Calvin Coolidge, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress in Anticipation of Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary, in 1932, of the Birth of George Washington,” February 22, 1927, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=418>.
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Heinz Tschachler is a former Associate Professor of English and American Studies at the University of Klagenfurt. His academic interests are relations between representation, ideology, and material conditions, including the discursive constructions of national identity, for instance through the Lewis and Clark expedition, as well as the cultural dimensions of coins and currency in the U.S. He has published on the literature of Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, James Dickey, on the writings of Lewis Mumford, has worked on science fiction, and published several books, including *The Greenback* (McFarland, 2010), *The Monetary Imagination of Edgar Allan Poe* (McFarland, 2013), *Americans for George* (Winkler Verlag, 2015), *George Washington and Political Fatherhood* (McFarland, 2020), and *George Washington on Coins and Currency* (McFarland, 2020). His most recent book is *Washington Irving and the Fantasy of Masculinity* (McFarland, 2022).

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“When you look at a calf, what do you see?”

Land(ed) Business, Necrotic Entrepreneurialism, and Competing Capitalisms in the Contemporary West of Yellowstone

Stefan Rabitsch

Abstract

For a popular, mass media text, Paramount’s hit television show *Yellowstone* (2018–) packs quite a punch. It renders visible in a mass-mediated, synecdochial format the latent and ongoing effects that settler colonialism and its entanglements with the necrotic logic of capitalism have on lifeworlds in the contemporary West. By making a traditionally privileged place—a multigenerational cattle ranch—the principal target of intrusive, increasingly powerful agents of big non-agricultural capital, who are portrayed as a threat to the local and regional polity and the social fabric of the rural West, *Yellowstone* says something tangible and pertinent about the fastest growing region in the United States, and the massive changes in land use and land development that have registered there in the past two and a half decades.

This article pursues a goal that is twofold. Firstly, it will map the Trans-Mississippi West as an entrepreneurial habitat where the agents of settler colonialism initiated patterns that continue to undergird land ownership, land development, and land use policies in the contemporary West. Secondly, I will read and explicate how *Yellowstone* remediates New/Post-West scholarship—the work of social historians and cultural geographers in particular—with a seemingly didactic zeal. Ultimately, this yields a rather sober(ing) view of entrepreneurship in that its frequently quoted Schumpeterian definition—creative destruction—amounts to an ideological position that can only ever produce formations of violence, be they physical, psychological, epistemic, symbolic, and/or ecological.

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“When you look at a calf, what do you see?”

Land(ed) Business, Necrotic Entrepreneurialism, and Competing Capitalisms in the Contemporary West of *Yellowstone*

Stefan Rabitsch

It is all about the land. Conceived and run by actor-turned-director/writer Taylor Sheridan, Paramount’s hit television show *Yellowstone* (2018–) has become the central node in a rapidly growing television franchise ecology with two spin-offs to date and two more in the production pipeline. Set in the eponymous fictional valley in Montana, the show follows the travails of sixth-generation rancher John Dutton (Kevin Costner), who owns the largest contiguous spread in the state. A widower of more than two decades and supported by his children, he works to maintain the family’s livestock operation and its attendant socio-political powerbase in both the community and the state as an onslaught of increasingly powerful, non-agricultural monied interests bring socio-economic upheaval and a fair share of violence to the valley. More importantly at present, however, *Yellowstone* is a show that speaks volumes to the entrepreneurial workings of capitalism in the West—past and present—and their attendant land-based complexities. Unlike classic genre westerns, there is little that is unambiguous about the world we enter in *Yellowstone*. A brief example shall serve as an entrypoint.

In the pilot episode, John Dutton asks his eldest son, Lee (Dave Annabel), who is in charge of day-to-day operations on the ranch, “When you look at that calf, what do you see?” after they helped a cow that had difficulties calving in one of the ranch’s many pastures. Clearly relieved by their good deed and extolling the virtues of good husbandry, Lee says, “I see a life I got to feed and defend until it grows up and feeds me.” While appreciative of his son’s cowboy ethic, John strikes a more entrepreneurial tone, responding, “That’s what a cowboy should see. But a cattleman sees a \$293

investment worth \$1,100 in seven months whether it feeds anyone or not.”²¹

Their brief exchange performs a fair amount of conceptual labor. First, usually obscured by decades’ worth of hyper-romanticization across media, John lays bare the classist hierarchies of power that have always undergirded the realities of livestock raising and horsemanship economies in the West: while cowpunchers, wranglers, etc.—that is cowboys—are but (poorly) waged laborers, control over and ownership of the means of production and their attendant capital rests with cattlemen. As John makes clear earlier in the scene, there is a difference between “running” and “working” a cattle outfit. Second, since ranching as an economic and cultural practice is no stranger to being maligned in performative culture wars, John unapologetically articulates what feminist rancher-writer Teresa Jordan has identified as “the essential irony of our work”—that “no one forgets that a live calf is money in the bank. And yet a reverence remains.”²² Similarly, Karen Merrill has located a “never resolved,” perhaps unresolvable “tension between guardianship and the market” in ranching.³ What is particularly striking is that John speaks to capitalism’s necrotic logic, which has undergirded the global meat industry—it is of little importance whether or not harvested meat is consumed (*Illustration 1*). Third, what is left unsaid, however, can be inferred from what the audience sees in the scene: a sprawling, albeit fenced, pasture surrounded by mixed coniferous forests on sloping hillsides with higher mountains visible in the distance. The livestock-raising economy the Dutton family partakes in is contingent on having access to, control over, and ownership of land. As rancher-scholar Nancy Cook has opined, to be “in the ranching business” means to be “always in the land business.”⁴ Not only does the pilot episode open with one of John’s three sons in front of a state government committee making the case against condemning a parcel of the ranch for a development project of a nearby town, time and again the show makes clear that it is all about the land. For example, later in the season, John confronts and sees off a group of Chinese tourists who have trespassed on his property, proclaiming that “this is America. We don’t share land here.”⁵ This is land that is contested and haunted by what is both a corrupted and corruptive zero-sum logic that renders *Yellowstone* a postwestern entrepreneurial drama. Lastly, Lee is soon killed after their conversation in an altercation where the ownership of cattle is in dispute. A spectral presence, violence haunts both the West as a region and the show in its own right, a condition I will return to in this article’s conclusion.

From the comfort of their living rooms, the audience can see “how ideological and economic changes in the West become manifest on the land.”⁶ After all, what John Dutton sees from the fence line of his ranch is “a peopled, cultured, playful, ugly West,”⁷ which draws equally from the paradigm-shifting *Atlas of the New West* (1997) and the scholarly labor of New Western historians in general as well as their postwestern scions who have successfully enmeshed the region in the carcinomatous forces of

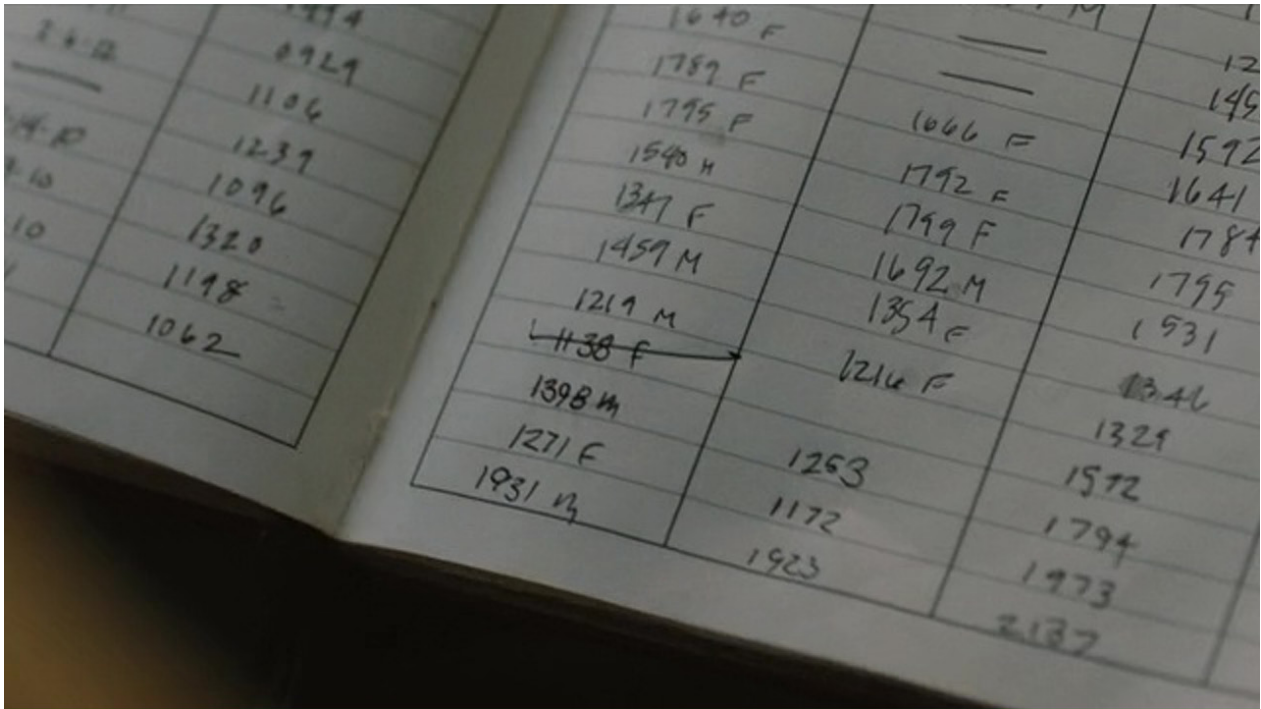


Illustration 1: The business of cattle.

Frame capture from *Yellowstone*, “Daybreak” (Season 1, Episode 1). *Yellowstone* © Paramount Pictures, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

late-stage capitalism. Consequently, *Yellowstone* renders visible in a mass-mediated, synecdochical format the latent and ongoing effects that settler colonialism and its entanglements with the necrotic logic of capitalism have on lifeworlds in the contemporary West. Made visible and thus accessible to critique, the show posits that the region, especially the Intermountain West, has been a habitat for entrepreneurial ventures that are contingent on the ownership of, and/or control over, the land and its attendant uses ever since the incursion of Europeans. Indeed, it only makes sense that *Yellowstone* centers on a multi-generational ranch; a family-owned agricultural unit is an ur-American, spatially manifest enterprise. Invoking claims of and to “authenticity,”⁸⁸ which, by definition, are dubious and suspect in mass media entertainment, Taylor Sheridan sees the show as a vehicle to extricate and rehabilitate the labor and lifeworlds of people in the livestock-raising and horsemanship economies from an excessive amount of romanticization. Despite what are arguably high levels of cowboy(ing) verisimilitude, the show, as a postwestern text, cannot but fail this lofty goal. While *Yellowstone* is invested in “a process of disengagement from the system it is in tension with (the Westerns of the past),” Neil Campbell has conceded “full knowledge that it is probably inescapable from that system as well,” thus making the postwestern “a mutational and dialogical form.”⁸⁹ The show’s pervasive elegiac nostalgia is a case in point. However, by making a traditionally privileged place—a multigenerational cattle ranch—the principal target of intrusive, increasingly powerful agents of big non-agricultural capital, who are portrayed as a threat to the local and

regional polity and the social fabric of the rural West, *Yellowstone* says something tangible and pertinent about the fastest-growing region in the United States, and the massive changes in land use and land development that have registered there in the past two and a half decades.¹⁰

For a popular, mass media text, *Yellowstone* packs quite a punch. Consequently, this article pursues a goal that is twofold. Firstly, it will map the Trans-Mississippi West as an entrepreneurial habitat where the agents of settler colonialism initiated patterns that continue to undergird land ownership, land development, and land use policies. These patterns of conspicuous consumption speak to how forces of big capital are spectral constants in the region which have ravaged the land as well as human and non-human bodies alike for multiple generations. Secondly, I will explicate how *Yellowstone* remediates New/Post-West scholarship—the work of social historians and cultural geographers in particular—with a seemingly didactic zeal. Ultimately, this yields a rather sober(ing) view of entrepreneurialism in that its frequently quoted Schumpeterian definition—“creative destruction”¹¹—amounts to an ideological position that can only ever produce formations of violence, be they physical, psychological, epistemic, symbolic, and/or ecological.

The American West as Entrepreneurial Habitat

For the contemporary non-Westerner—and even for Westerners—it might be challenging to see the long history of entrepreneurialism in the region, let alone how its pervasive patterns continue to shape lifeworlds today. For quite some time now, the hotshots of the information industry have been the default exemplars of entrepreneurial prowess and success. It is all but certain that when people think of the American West and entrepreneurship, Silicon Valley’s elite, the likes of Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and hundreds like them—not to mention the thousands of aspirants to their type of success—is what comes to mind. Partially the product of government-enabled development after World War II, a relatively small speck of the West, Santa Clara county in California, has since become synonymous with high-tech entrepreneurialism. A resource that comes from the land, silicates, which are a key element in transistors, integrated circuit chips, and a host of other electrical components, have enabled the rise of Silicon Valley. However, the exceptional(ist) position ascribed to these entrepreneurial heroes of our second Gilded Age is hardly warranted.¹² The “dean of western literature,”¹³ Wallace Stegner, has observed that their “entrepreneurial attributes are not greatly different from those of an old-time cattle baron.”¹⁴ His observation merely gestures at the extent to which Western spaces have been thought of in economic terms which can be efficiently excavated and mapped when “thinking [in] postwestern [terms].”¹⁵

Contrary to the epistemic and moral certainties of the mythic West, and the ideological confidence propagated by the Turnerian school of western history, there is one appellation that has become axiomatic in the scholarship about the region over the past three decades: the West is complex, always has been. In both historical and contemporary terms, the region amounts to a palimpsest of complexity where intersections between entrepreneurialism and the land register on many, if not most, layers of the region's geomorphic surfaces and historical substrates. While "the Old West had more or less one kind of story to tell," Nina Baym has argued, "the New West has many different kinds of story, and the Postwest worries about the ontological status of any story a western historian or writer or literary academic might want to narrate."¹⁶ Accessing the region from this vantage point means, according to Neil Campbell, "to see it as several spaces simultaneously, overlapping, in contact and exchange . . . always relational, dialogic . . . and, therefore, contradictory, irreducible, and hybrid."¹⁷ Invoking Renée L. Bergland,¹⁸ Campbell has since expanded on this idea, appraising the West as "a spectral landscape[,] . . . a layered, scarred region, both geographical and psychological," which has accumulated "an inheritance buried deep in the American national psyche."¹⁹ Practicing a multiscopic way of seeing, the spectral presences on (and also below) the land bear the imprint of the transformational, albeit often violent, labor performed by capital, and "the ownership of land [has been] a primary part of that narrative."²⁰

Rooted in settler-colonist practices and increasingly codified since the land policies of the Early Republic and the mid-nineteenth century (e.g., the Land Act of 1797, the establishment of the General Land Office in 1812, the Homestead Act of 1862), expansionist modes of land-based entrepreneurialism have always defined the West. Regardless of whether they are forms of individual or corporate enterprise, they have repeatedly transformed "the West into a commodified landscape," but "not simply a landscape filled with natural resources to be mined and harvested, it was also a symbolic landscape available for consumption."²¹ The process by which these transformations have taken place is predicated on "a fundamental assumption," which is that "land would be property."²² Since the "ownership and occupation of western land was both desired and then contested by many peoples,"²³ this fundamental assumption begot, and then worked in conjunction with, legal fictions designed to "rid the frontier of all impediments to economic enterprise."²⁴ From an Anglo-European point of view, this, of course, meant that the indigenous stewards of the land as well as competing colonial/imperial ethnicities (e.g., in the Spanish, later Mexican Southwest) would be made cultural and economic subalterns. While the federal polity has enshrined the existence of, and access to, a public commons as a fundamental public good in its laws, William Robbins has contended that "for more than a century the nation's land policy was singularly obsessed with transferring ownership to private hands."²⁵ The

fault lines between public access and use, and private development and use continue to be part of everyday life in the West. Ideologically and economically, the transfer of public land into private ownership only makes sense given both the meaning and value ascribed to land over the course of American history. Painting in broad strokes, James Oliver Robertson has observed that “land meant agriculture, crops, surpluses, rents, food in the belly, and riches; it meant place and position, status and power, security and continuity.”²⁶ Needless to say, for the dispossessed and those unable to acquire land holdings, it more often than not translated into the opposites.

The labor that capital performs on the land within a settler-colonial frame of reference is, however, not an abstract process. Often state-enabled, sometimes state-sponsored, it is directed and enacted by monied agents and/or entities. American westward expansion and consolidation produced a number of land business ventures that have since achieved hallmark status. For example, the magnates who directed the transcontinental railroads across the Great Plains, the Rockies, the Great Basin, and the desert Southwest—people like Leland Stanford, Thomas “Doc” Durant, Jay Cook, and James J. Hill—are frequently listed as the immediate forebears of Gilded Age industrialists.²⁷ Perhaps lesser known outside the West, but no less impactful on land ownership and land use in the region were large cattle outfits such as the XIT, the JA, and the 6666 ranches, which were usually financed by East Coast and/or European, especially Scottish, capital.²⁸ More specific models of land-based and/or land-dependent entrepreneurialism showcase not only how pervasive entrepreneurialism has been in the West, but also how they established patterns of capital, ownership, and power whose latent influence still registers.

Writing about coastal California in 1835, Richard Henry Dana exuberantly asserted, “In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be.”²⁹ Swiss émigré John Sutter fit Dana’s aspirational profile of what Howard R. Lamar has termed the “wilderness entrepreneur.”³⁰ In 1839, Sutter obtained a land grant in the Central Valley from the Mexican governor to establish a trading post, where he then “traded with Indians, participated in the fur trade, tried to raise food, and successfully built up herds of horses and cattle.”³¹ Sutter was not an aberration but rather paradigmatic of Jacksonian Common Man entrepreneurialism; and the wilderness trading post was a typical entrepreneurial model in the West, which, even if individual posts failed, often served as the basis for local townships or agricultural ventures. Staying in the Golden State, William Robbins has mapped how “the state’s finest agricultural lands, including properties deeded by Mexico to a few hundred owners,” correspond with “California’s large agribusiness ownership patterns of today,” and “therefore, mirror the past.”³²

Another paradigmatic model is what Carl Abbott has aptly called “early versions

of smokestack chasing.”³³ On the eastern fringes of the West in the latter third of the nineteenth century, towns and communities answered “declines in their agricultural base” by way of “economic development planning” that translated into “land assembly, public infrastructure investment, place marketing, and tax incentives.”³⁴ Fast-forward to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and we see “worn-out resources towns convert to tourism as city people search out scenery,” vis-à-vis “rural economic development districts and small town elites . . . recruit[ing] tenants for new industrial parks.”³⁵ These are the real-world dynamics of “various land-control regimes” that undergird the postwestern entrepreneurial drama of *Yellowstone*.³⁶

What conceptualizing, mapping, and reading the Trans-Mississippi West as entrepreneurial habitat then allows us to do is to track and parse the state- and capital-enabled process of “put[ting] sovereign territory on the market” in real and imagined geographies.³⁷ In the vein of the popular culture labor performed by *Yellowstone*, such an approach aligns with the tenets of “critical regionalism” with a view to “mobiliz[ing] a more varied vision of the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.”³⁸ The region’s settler-colonial legacy—“a form of agricultural work premised on . . . the colonial mastery over indigenous peoples, animals and landscapes”³⁹—has carried forward two principal ethics: i) the homestead ethic and ii) the entrepreneurial ethic. A “grassroots doctrine,” the former is rooted in three assumed rights, “the right to have and to hold a family-size farm, the homestead; the right to enjoy a homestead unencumbered by a ruinous economic burden such as an onerous mortgage or oppressive taxes; and the right peacefully to occupy the homestead without fear of violence (such as that by Indians or outlaws) to person or property.”⁴⁰ The latter expresses the belief in “individual enterprise in a market economy.”⁴¹ It is all but obvious that when enterprising agents of capital covet the same land for different uses, the shear forces which emanate from their zones of contact are likely to yield tension, indeed conflict.

“This ain’t checkers, son”: Ranching is Preferable to Aspenization; Or, a New “Old” West(ern) Story

In her paradigm-shifting work *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), New Western historian Patricia Limerick went on record, stating that “if Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate.”⁴² Though likely unintentional and coming in the form of a television show rather than a feature film, Taylor Sheridan has arguably riposted Limerick’s quip with *Yellowstone*.⁴³ The series is all about land—who has access to it, who owns it, who would like to acquire it, who has been deprived of it—and the incompatible goals of how to best use and/or

develop it. Its timbre is thus in tune with what Wallace Stegner has identified as a key characteristic of Westerners (new and old)—that is, an unadulterated “love of the land.”⁴⁴ However, this love—though covetousness might be a better term—accommodates contradictory, sometimes entirely antithetical values and ideas, ranging from “a fatal carelessness and destructiveness,” sustaining conspicuous consumption to “an impassioned protectiveness,” which encompasses the sacrality of private property as well as public conservation concerns.⁴⁵ Consequently, the landed complexities that inform the central drama and conflict of the show derive from what Peter Walker has diagnosed as the “tensions between competing capitalisms that commodify nature in incompatible ways.”⁴⁶ More specifically, “the key process,” William Travis contends, is located in “the appropriation of rural land with capital not associated with, or earned from, traditional rural land uses such as farming, ranching, logging, and mining.”⁴⁷

For those less accustomed to contemporary Western lifeworlds and their entanglements with land development and land use, *Yellowstone* offers simplified albeit symbolically potent motifs that are convenient avenues for getting into the weeds of the West’s landed complexities. Throughout the series, these complexities are explicated in abridged form by way of addressing how their attendant socio-economic changes register in seemingly mundane practices of consumption.⁴⁸ For example, in the pilot episode, John Dutton’s prodigal son, Kayce (Luke Grimes), takes his bi-racial son, Tate (Brecken Merrill), to an ice cream parlor in downtown Bozeman. He asks his father whether this was where he had ice cream with his dad when he was young; Kayce promptly replies, “This wasn’t here when I was a boy. None of this was. I will say this though. These transplants sure can make some ice cream.” Visibly puzzled, Tate wants to know what or who a transplant is, which leads Kayce to explain that they use the term to refer to “a person who moves to a place, and then they try to make that place just like the place they left.”⁴⁹ The response leaves Tate even more befuddled. Coffee serves a similar purpose; considerable attention is given to Jamie (Wes Bentley), the third of three Dutton sons,⁵⁰ grabbing a cup of “pour-over” coffee at a local hipster coffee shop for his out-of-state campaign manager-turned-lover who extolls that “the best measure of progress in a town is decent coffee.”⁵¹ While Harvard-educated, Jamie’s Westernness is made explicit by him not caring about the diverse selection of coffee he has to choose from, nor the latest brewing techniques. Meanwhile, we see John Dutton have regular drip coffee at a local greasy spoon.

These relatively simple motifs illustrate the transregional demographic shifts and their attendant socio-economic changes in that the significant increase of “new rural settlers [who] bring their jobs and incomes with them,” and then “demand services not typical to rural economies.”⁵² Bozeman makes an ideal example, since it is one of many regional cities that have been reclassified as “micropolitan areas.”⁵³ They are

the urban-ish nuclei that have driven the transformation of “Cowboy Counties” into “Cappuccino Counties” in the past two decades.⁵⁴ To be sure, while “westerners have been trying to simplify the West into monochromatic societies . . . for a very long time,” Joseph Taylor has confirmed that “rural patterns have been displaced by the demands of a broad, transnational class of amenity-seeking, franchise-patronizing consumers.”⁵⁵ What has changed in the past two to three decades, however, are the pace, the extent, and the excess of how these “economic changes . . . transformed the region’s land use patterns and have altered its long-standing land use battles.”⁵⁶ Consequently, *Yellowstone*’s fictional locale exhibits considerable synecdochical value, since it explicates the economic and demographic pressures that have registered all over the region; and nowhere is the “unbridled development” entrepreneurialism more visible than on rangeland.⁵⁷

Following John Dutton’s patriarchally charged position as narrative focalizer, *Yellowstone* not only remediates the symptoms and effects of the changes in rural land development, but also addresses the seismic shifts in the systemic substrate that had ossified land use regimes over decades; and, the series does that without being ignorant of indigenous concerns. Succinctly summarizing the visible effects on the land, William Travis has mapped how “spreading residential and commercial land uses are transforming the West’s emblematic landscapes: its mountain fronts, its great swaths of rangeland, and its desert canyons.”⁵⁸ Various labels “exurban sprawl,”⁵⁹ “the gentrified range,”⁶⁰ “wilderburbs,”⁶¹ or “weekendlands,”⁶² these land development ventures represent the transformation of largely agriculturally productive spaces, presided over by legacy landowners, into a non-agricultural amenity landscape and “positional good” by “city makers.”⁶³ These real estate investors and developers cater to a rapidly growing market of residency seekers, often “equity refugees,”⁶⁴ who look for (and can afford) “great views of mountains (and maybe distant city lights), elk outside your window, neighboring public lands on which you can roam, and all within, say, an hour’s drive to city, airport, and ski slope.”⁶⁵

In the series, this is what Dan Jenkins (Danny Houston) is selling: having accumulated wealth in the California gaming industry, he is a newly arrived transplant who seeks to develop land directly adjacent to the Dutton ranch into a planned community of subdivisions and possibly condos. When the audience first sees him, he already owns and operates a sporting club-con-resort and golf course, which, as can be seen in the first meeting between John and Dan, presses up right against the ranch’s fence. The symbolism could not be more obvious with the rich greens of the irrigated and landscaped lawn, representing his development goals and what he calls “progress,”⁶⁶ vis-à-vis the yellows and ochre of the much drier rangeland lorded over by Dutton on top of his horse (*Illustration 2*). Visually, it seems as if John is afforded the moral high ground. What follows in season one and parts of season two is Jenkins engaging in a



Illustration 2: The business of land.

Frame capture from *Yellowstone*, “Daybreak” (Season 1, Episode 1). *Yellowstone* © Paramount Pictures, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

series of entrepreneurial maneuvers and counter-maneuvers with a view to shaking loose the Dutton family’s grip on parts of their holdings and their power base in the community and the state government. Apart from the societal and ecological changes (e.g., rising rents, food and gas prices, increased traffic, and environmental degradation due to increased recreational use) that land development projects like Jenkins’s entail, they have a significant impact on land prices, which, in conjunction with changing demographics, also alter the tax base. While increased tax revenues are usually presented as a boon to local and state governments, they can quickly become a liability for legacy landowners like the Duttons and other ranchers we see in the series. Long-time landowners could maintain their holdings thanks to a relatively low tax burden. William Travis has identified “the point of inheritance to be especially vulnerable,”⁶⁷ for these landowners, which Jenkins, under duress, reveals as his strategic linchpin when threatened with a good-old western hanging in the unraveling finale of the first season: “We’ll inflate the land prices. Run up the property tax. And price people out.” Portentously, Jenkins adds, “You think I’m gonna be the last person who’s gonna wanna take it?”⁶⁸ However, before he can make good on his scheme, he is dispatched by other landed powerbrokers in a different economic sector who made it clear to him that “thriving in Montana is all about staying in your lane.”⁶⁹

Jenkins’s estate is subsequently swallowed by the purveyors of a particularly pernicious and regionally derided form of land development: Aspenization. A form

of “corporate-controlled colonization,” this type of land development sees “small ranching and mining towns discovered and transformed into resorts, their residents overwhelmed,” by “extravagant new commercial and residential investment.”⁷⁰ Two seemingly innocuous acts of trespassing signal the arrival of mega-corp Market Equities. First, a group of suits wander onto one of the ranch’s pastures while assessing the defunct Jenkins estate and are bluntly seen off. Then, a fly fisherman is caught wading in a section of a river that belongs to the Dutton family. He is soon revealed to be Roarke Morris, a hedge fund manager and frontman for Market Equities. He delineates to Beth (Kelly Reilly), John’s daughter, that even though “Dan Jenkins was a smart guy . . .[,] his dreams just weren’t big enough. Why dream about building golf courses when you can build cities?”⁷¹ Having already secured a Forest Service lease and pre-approval by the Federal Aviation Administration, Market Equities seeks to either buy out ranchers in the valley or make the case to the state government to condemn private property under eminent domain. Beth ascertains their goals: “They are building an airport and a ski resort . . . And then they’re gonna build a city around it.”⁷² With monied interests in excess of multiple billions stepping onto the scene, it falls to Governor Perry (Wendy Moniz), whose ear John Dutton also has, to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of such a large infusion of cash into the state economy, knowing fully well that Market Equities wield the kind of capital and power that can sway elections. In a series of conversations between the different stakeholders, the mega-corp’s growth-or-die boosterism,⁷³ which is undergirded by a zero-sum logic, is both explicated and critiqued. For example, Jamie counters their default arguments—increased tax revenues and job growth—with their well-documented side effects: “Thousands of low paying service jobs. Skilled labor, I’m sure, will come from out of state. Which will drive the home prices even higher, if that’s possible. You’re pricing people out of the valley.”⁷⁴ The crux is that a large segment of the labor force is pushed into bedroom communities, or worse,⁷⁵ “reminiscent of nineteenth-century logging camps[,] or commute long distances to service wealthy tourists.”⁷⁶ *Yellowstone* explicitly nods to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the subject of Justin Farrell’s book-length study *Billionaire Wilderness* (2020). The town is the county seat of “the richest county in the United States and the county with the nation’s highest level of income inequality.”⁷⁷ Ultimately, in the explosive finale of season three, the fate of the valley seems sealed as the governor makes clear that, “There is no choice anymore, John. There are only options.”⁷⁸ These options then become somewhat more convoluted as John Dutton makes a bid for, and then secures, the governor’s office in season four and the first half of the as-yet-unfinished fifth and final season.

Over the course of its first three seasons in particular, different voices tease out the capitalist logic that informs the entrepreneurial ventures big money is bringing to the region and repeatedly impress upon the ranch patriarch that he is facing

competitors who are not obliged to operate within established, regionally-anchored frameworks; nor do they care or have to. John's daughter sums it up succinctly: "What this place is facing... it isn't an enemy. It's a perspective. It's a shift in values. The world doesn't value your way of life anymore, Dad."⁷⁹ Similarly, when the governor visits John at the summer cow camp in the mountains, where he tries to sway her by way of the state's heritage as cattle country con western sunset, she tells him outright, "I can see why this is the dream they want to sell." John retorts, "Yep... but you can't sell this. You gotta earn it. You gotta live it. And that's what they'll never understand." Like his daughter, the governor hits the proverbial nail on the head: "But they only want to sell it. And they could care less about the dream coming true. That's what you've got to understand."⁸⁰ While "originally sites of commodity production," ranches like the Duttons' have become "a commodity in their own right, purchased for recreation and for the 'ranch' ideal."⁸¹ Crucially, they are developed and purchased to consume this ideal without adding, let alone replenishing value. As Nancy Cook has observed, "When the rich folks get bored and leave, they sell out to other rich people."⁸² Consequently, all last stand bravado and latent pastoral romanticism (of which there is a lot in the series) aside, the Dutton family is confronted with the carcinomatous realities of late-stage capitalism. Adhering to a necrotic logic, these commodification schemes translate into a mode of consumption where that which they are contingent on is consumed until it ceases to exist.

Even more interestingly perhaps, the entrepreneurial and ideological wranglings over land in *Yellowstone* say something about the systemic changes in the political substrate of the West that have enabled, or at the very least accelerated, changes in land development and land use. To be sure, John Dutton, his family, and other "Lords of Yesterday," to borrow from Charles Wilkinson,⁸³ are neither powerless, nor are they innocent victims, far from it. John wields considerable, some might say feudal, power in "his" valley. For example, when Dan Jenkins smugly proclaims that "progress doesn't need your permission," John retorts, "Yeah, in this valley it does."⁸⁴ Much to Jenkins' consternation, John's powerbase encompasses—but is not limited to—being the State Livestock Commissioner and thus controlling an agency with executive powers; a daughter who works for an investment firm and who is called upon to stage defensive maneuvers; a lawyer son who serves in the State Attorney General's Office and who later becomes the AG. Additionally, he is friendly with local law enforcement, has the backing of stockgrowers associations, has the governor's ear, and so and so forth. While some might rightfully call this a nepotistic cabal of local/regional interests, these structures actually conform to "subgovernment theory," which is "a simple descriptive device for identifying causal relationships between actors and the strategies they employ to dominate the policy setting."⁸⁵ Historically, ranchers and other agricultural landowners established solid organizational ties in the absence of

a strong federal presence in the West prior to the Great Depression.⁸⁶ These formed the systemic basis for “so-called iron triangles,” i.e., “relationships between interest groups, agency bureaus, and congressional subcommittees,”⁸⁷ which William Kelso has described as “mutually supportive and harmonious” until the turn of the twenty-first century.⁸⁸ As can also be inferred from *Yellowstone*, “resource users often manipulated the system for private advantage.”⁸⁹ Since the presidency of George W. Bush, however, these ironclad structures have increasingly softened up as “an unintended consequence of the expansion of domestic energy production,” effectively “displac[ing] the ranching industry’s historical domination of . . . land-use policy subgovernment.”⁹⁰ In other words, iron triangles are gradually giving way to “open systems,”⁹¹ in which “previously closed policy domains are now described as porous and susceptible to the influence of competing players.”⁹² In the series, the onus for these seismic shifts is not only on the Jenkinsees and Roarkes who seek to Aspenize the valley, but it is also crafted into a narrative space for indigenous voices and their agendas.

While the show might appear to give the moral and ideological high ground to John Dutton, *Yellowstone* is fairly explicit in assigning settler-colonial blame and responsibility to his family. More than once, John all but declares that their holdings were essentially stolen from the original stewards of the land. For example, late in the second season, Jenkins visits the ranch and explains his rationale for coming to the valley: “So beautiful. Every direction. It’s just like a painting. All I wanted was give people the opportunity to see it, you know. . . . I have just as much right to be here as you.” John could not disagree more, saying that “no one has a right. You have to take the right. Or stop it from being taken from you.”⁹³ This is but one example of how *Yellowstone* gestures to “the continued vitality of issues widely believed to be dead.”⁹⁴ With Market Equities stepping onto the scene, and deployed with a hefty dose of irony, John’s Native American daughter-in-law, Monika (Kelsey Asbille),⁹⁵ confronts him with the following observation: “Kayce used to tell me what a war it was for you, keeping this place. When this land belonged to my people a hundred and fifty years ago, children were stolen and men were killed. Families herded away like cattle. And nothing’s changed. Except you’re the Indian now.”⁹⁶

Not only does she make clear in so many words that the ranch is built on stolen land, but as the subaltern in this conversation, she also (re)assigns subalternity to John; it is a sign of things to come since it is he and his family who are made subalterns of big(ger) capital. With the contemporary West having rapidly grown into “a neo-colonial area,”⁹⁷ *Yellowstone* concludes its third season with Market Equities moving on the Duttons like they would be doing, according to their CEO Willa Hayes (Karen Pittman), “an oil deal in Yemen.”⁹⁸

“I want our land back”:

The Decolonizing Plans of a Native American Entrepreneur

If *Yellowstone* did not have the makings of a postwestern text, it would likely “fail to recognize that from the Native American perspective, the region’s history is little more than a chronicle of white ‘settlers’ coveting Indian land and their subsequent effort to exterminate, dispossess, and remove the native population.”⁹⁹ However, any such charge would not hold up to scrutiny since the series’s entrepreneurial drama over land features indigenous presences over absences with a view to not only thematizing those absences in the past along with their systemic causes, but also to adding a seemingly postcolonial counterweight to the capitalist slugfest between the descendants of settler colonists (old and new). Taylor Sheridan has worked hard to deliver respectful, relevant, and poignant representation of Native American characters, communities, and concerns which, instead of rehashing problematic stereotypes of neutered victimhood, defeatism, and expiration, speaks to, and embodies, agency, resilience, and survivance.¹⁰⁰ One of John Dutton’s adversaries is the newly appointed chairman of the Broken Rock Indian Reservation, Thomas Rainwater (Gil Birmingham). Drawing on formidable entrepreneurial acumen, courtesy of Harvard, the American Petroleum Institute, and Merrill Lynch, he is intent on leveraging the power of capital by way of a casino and resort operation as a means for the dispossessed subaltern to actualize “Land Back” activism. In the process, he and other indigenous characters become sounding boards for the necrotic effects of participating in the wrangling of big capital over land. What the show also points to is the irreversible damage—ecological, social, and psychological—that capitalist settler colonialism has already wrought upon ancestral lands.

Native American characters such as Rainwater serve a twofold purpose. First, they repeatedly level postcolonial charges about accountability at the heirs, benefactors, and perpetrators of white settler colonialism. For example, early in the first season, Dan Jenkins barking inevitable progress at John Dutton is juxtaposed with Rainwater telling Dutton something else with the same air of inevitability in a symbolically potent space—a prison courtyard ([Illustration 3](#)): “I’m the opposite of progress, John. I am the past... catching up with you.”¹⁰¹ Secondly, Native American characters are molded in the vein of “middle ground” scholarship,¹⁰² which posits that “alien cultures and peoples inventively attempted to find a common cultural, linguistic, and symbolic ground upon which to interact.”¹⁰³ Thus, *Yellowstone* contributes to understanding indigenous peoples as being not mere passive victims of settler colonialism but rather active, albeit unequal, participants who never surrendered their agency. In the same scene, Rainwater tells Dutton, “After I interned at Emerson, I worked for Merrill Lynch in mergers and acquisitions. I figured it’ll take about 14 billion to buy it all ... The valley. And I’m gonna buy your ranch first ... And then I’m gonna pull down every fence



Illustration 3: The (compromised) business of “Land Back.”

Frame capture from *Yellowstone*, “No Good Horses” (Season 1, Episode 3). *Yellowstone* © Paramount Pictures, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

and any evidence that your family ever existed will be removed from the property. It’ll look like it used to... when it was ours.”¹⁰⁴ Chairman Rainwater is yet another entrepreneurial and monied player in the landed complexities of *Yellowstone*’s West.

By way of a tribally owned and operated casino, the fictional Confederated Tribe at Broken Rock Indian Reservation becomes the narrative focus for showcasing this nation’s stake in the wranglings over landownership in the valley as well as highlighting its chairman’s entrepreneurial agency and acumen in shifting entanglements with the other players involved. Though fictional, the Broken Rock nation is a vehicle for discussing how “Native nations are exploring the multiple ways that the incorporation of casino gaming redefines tribalism and sovereignty.”¹⁰⁵ Rainwater is introduced in both postcolonial and entrepreneurial terms vis-à-vis his proposed casino venture. Just prior to his swearing-in as the new chairman, he tells a U.S. senator who is in attendance, “The gambler’s money is like a river, flowing one way... our way. Senator, you’ve never driven a road or walked a trail or skied a mountain in Montana that didn’t belong to my people first. This nation doesn’t want to give it back? So be it. We’ll buy it back... with their money.”¹⁰⁶ After serious gains in civil rights had merged with President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty—especially the Community Action Program “promot[ing] gaming as a means of growing tribal economies because of its relatively low start-up costs and low overhead”¹⁰⁷—and following landmark court cases protecting tribal gaming,¹⁰⁸ Native nations across the region and

beyond have found in casinos “a means to support Native self-sufficiency.”¹⁰⁹ However, as Lisa Emmerich contends, it was the “circumstances that had plummeted Native communities into poverty” in the first place—“isolation, land holdings that had been carved away by federal policies, few or no usable resources, and no connection to American industrialization”—which ironically “brought them to consider gaming as a means of escape.”¹¹⁰ A subaltern accustomed to speaking (and acting) back, Rainwater addresses these ironies and their attendant inequities of trying to participate in the free market system. During a temporary truce, he tells John Dutton, “I don’t really want another casino either. It’s an insulting and wickedly ironic revenue stream for an Indian Nation. It is a means to an end”¹¹¹—that end being the repatriation of his nation’s ancestral homeland. How he envisions undoing the effects of decades of capitalist exploitation remains unspecified, though. If the goal of the Jenkinsees and Roarkes is to build new homes and John Dutton’s goal is to hold on to and pass on his home, then for Rainwater it is all about restoring his people’s home. More than once, we hear him say that he and whoever is his opposite “want the same thing for very different reasons.”¹¹²

The presence of, and agency emanating from, tribal lands in postwestern texts, according to Krista Comer, remind audiences of “Indian sovereignty and national autonomy” while “reservations are represented as . . . the sites of new forms of toxicity.”¹¹³ Rainwater’s entrepreneurial maneuvers and counter-maneuvers repeatedly give rise to moments where both the ironies and the very real systemic inequities and injustices that continue to plague indigenous lifeworlds on and off the rez are explored. Whilst allied with Dan Jenkins, Rainwater impresses upon him the power and value of Indian sovereignty: “When you sold me the land, Dan, I gave you freedom from [state] oversight.”¹¹⁴ Rainwater wields his nation’s sovereignty not only to gain economic leverage, but also in line with his goal to decolonize the valley, i.e., a means to reproach and then redress the legacy of U.S.-Native judicial relations. He is intent on rectifying rulings such as John Marshall’s 1831 majority opinion in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, in which he held that Native tribes were “domestic dependent nations” occupying “territory to which we assert a title independent of their will.”¹¹⁵ It was rulings such as these that “validated” the legal fictions of the protectionist (broken-) treaty system and assimilationist policies that followed. Eschewing two-dimensional saviorism, indigenous lifeworlds are represented with inflections of intricacies. For instance, Rainwater’s casino venture is met with opposition by some of his own council members, which is in line with ongoing debates in Indian country that range from “the degradation of traditional values to eligibility for tribal membership to the (mis)management of revenues.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, Taylor Sheridan has used Rainwater’s character portfolio to weave an issue that is dear to him (see his 2017 feature *Wind River*) into *Yellowstone*: the abduction and killing of Native American women.

Leveraging his statutory power as chairman and the monetary brawn of the casino operation, Rainwater is “forming a council to focus on violence against women on the reservation. It will take our stories to the universities. To Congress. To anyone who will listen.”¹¹⁷ He places John Dutton’s Native daughter-in-law Monica in charge. While promising at first, this storyline was all but dropped as the show made major inroads in the mass media mainstream during its hiatus between seasons three and four.¹¹⁸

Monica’s role as a liminal character who is caught between, and tries to reconcile, her husband’s white settler heritage with her tribal identity and role as teacher at a reservation school makes her a vehicle for expressing the most ardent critique of the forces that inform and perpetuate the landed complexities in the West along with what appears to be their inevitable outcome: violence and the irreversible damage that it has already caused. Thanks to John Dutton leveraging some of his sub-government capital with the president of Montana State University, Monica receives a job as an instructor teaching a class in American history—“Columbus’s arrival to the Declaration of Independence”¹¹⁹—and an opportunity to complete her PhD at the beginning of the second season. In her inaugural lecture, she is promptly confronted with toxic masculinity and racist stereotyping found among the student body, which she uses as an occasion to deliver a poignant critique of the carcinomatous realities of late-stage capitalism as the result of settler colonialism. Confronting those who verbally accosted her with a simple question concerning the definition of power, she maps the latent influence of Eurocentric epistemologies and their corruptive as well as destructive effects on contemporary lifeworlds, “Ever feel like making someone do you want, whether they want to or not? It’s a very European mentality, stemming from the oppressive political and religious structures of the Renaissance . . . That was the mentality of the men who discovered America. And it is the mentality our society struggles with today. What you know of history is a dominant culture’s justification for its actions. And I don’t teach that. I’ll teach you what happened. To my people. And to yours. Because we are all the descendants of the subjugated. Every one of us.”¹²⁰ This leaves but one question to be answered: what or who has turned the denizens of the contemporary West—whether they are newly arrived, or have called the region their home since time immemorial—into descendants of the subjugated? Monica’s lecture seems to suggest that it can only be the necrotic labor performed and extracted by capitalism. She wants both her students and the audience to hold accountable the dual paradigms of European settler colonialism and capitalism in an argument that is as simple as it is powerful. Consequently, we can draw but violent conclusions from her indictment.



Illustration 4: The “descendants of the subjugated” and their business.

John Potter cartoon #28 Potter, John. “Bozeman, Montana: Capital Of The New Unwild West?” *Mountain Journal*, September 11, 2021. <https://mountainjournal.org/is-bozeman-montana-is-selling-its-soul-to-the-purveyors-of-greed>. Used by permission from Mountain Journal.

“Meaner than Evil”: Violent Conclusions

Despite the presence of elegiac, horse-mounted livestock laborers set against breathtaking pastoral scenes, the West the audience enters through *Yellowstone* is not one of romance or myth. A postwestern text in aspiration, structure, and execution, the region in its contemporary state and Taylor Sheridan’s imagining is messy and ugly despite, or according to most players in its landed complexities because of its purportedly pristine environs—a resource coveted by seemingly everyone though for different reasons. The show’s fictional valley is a synecdochical space that registers and reflects the significant changes in demographics and their attendant shifts in land development and land use that have been occurring throughout the region at an increasing pace since the turn of the twenty-first century. Consequently, *Yellowstone* places a magnifying glass on what are but the most recent layers of the

West as a palimpsest of complexity, where intersections between entrepreneurialism and the land tend to point to “a persistent assault on nature that left a legacy of destruction, depletion and death.”¹²¹ Since the earliest incursions of Europeans in the region, the West has been rendered a habitat for entrepreneurial ventures that are contingent on the ownership of, and/or control over, the land and its attendant uses, as they are conducive to, and coveted by, Eurocentric modes of production and consumption. Following the settler-colonialist logic, then, what are those entrepreneurial ventures if not an amalgamation of violent acts.

Let us not forget, entrepreneurialism in its Schumpeterian definition—creative destruction—is an inherently violent process, the significance of which only comes into view when taking into account the pathogenic metaphors Joseph Schumpeter used to describe its qualities and the Darwinist conclusions he drew from them. Writing about “an organic process” and a “process of industrial mutation,” he identified the “process of Creative Destruction” as “the essential fact about capitalism,” which he understood to be “an evolutionary process . . . whose every element takes considerable time in revealing its true features and ultimate effects.”¹²² As a geo-cultural space, the American West is no stranger to violence. In its ideologically privileged and incessantly mythologized permutation, the region has offered violence as a regenerative, or at the very least a redemptive, means.¹²³ In entrepreneurial terms, the region has then given life to “great” entrepreneurial drama, or, more precisely perhaps, drama of great entrepreneurial violence. However, violence is neither an innovative nor regenerative process, since understanding it as such belies its necrotic logic. It may indeed bring ephemeral transformation and/or progress (in a Eurocentric meaning of the word) but ultimately it consumes those resources—material and immaterial—which it needs as fuel and/or sustenance until it collapses in on itself, ceasing to exist. In the case of the contemporary West as it is represented in *Yellowstone*, the true features and ultimate effects of entrepreneurially motivated land(ed) business are unambiguously clear: they are as violent as they are necrotic.

For all the stand-your-ground defiance of the ranching patriarchs of yesteryear and their cowboy(ing) vassals as well as the actors of postcolonial survivance and resistance in *Yellowstone*, the trail the contemporary West is on is likely leading to a bleak outcome. As William Travis has diagnosed, “Antigrowth, slow-growth, and even ‘smart growth’ forces are weak, their campaigns outmaneuvered by local and regional growth machines,” since “government in the West mostly promotes further development with pro-growth programs of all sorts, from tax breaks to water projects.”¹²⁴ In the end, it might very well be that both the series and the region find their terminus in John Dutton’s lament: “It’s all for nothing.”¹²⁵

Acknowledgments

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Notes

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- 68 “The Unravelling: Part 2,” writ. and dir. Taylor Sheridan, *Yellowstone*, season 1, episode 9 (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2018).
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The Bicycle in the Service of Reform

Frances Willard's Social Entrepreneurship, Her "Do Everything" Policy, and the Temperance Temple Campaign

Kelly Payne & Janel Simons

Abstract

This essay situates Frances Willard's temperance reform campaigns as entrepreneurial in nature, and claims Willard as a key nineteenth-century American social innovator. Much has been written on Willard's temperance policies and her leadership in the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement as well as her founding of the World Woman's Christian Temperance Organization. The writings Willard produced on women's access to and engagement with the bicycle as a reform technology has not been explored. In offering a narrative of the strategies and experiences Willard used to employ the bicycle as a tool or ally for temperance reform and woman's rights, this essay argues for the inclusion of women's voices in the public sphere and in publication around social and economic mobility. The bicycle offered Willard and her WCTU organization a key metonymic image—the wheel—around which to analyze the relationship of temperance to everyday lives. Willard's "Do Everything" campaign can be seen as the nineteenth-century equivalent of vast social entrepreneurship.

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The Bicycle in the Service of Reform

Frances Willard's Social Entrepreneurship, Her “Do Everything” Policy, and the Temperance Temple Campaign

Kelly Payne & Janel Simons

A true woman is womanly in whatever she chooses to do and wherever she chooses to live.

Frances Willard,
Occupations for Women (Success Company, 1897)

When Frances Willard (1839–1898) welcomed the “bicycle as a reformer” in the 1890s, she not only actuated her “Do Everything” temperance reform policy but also challenged the tradition of American entrepreneurialism by introducing women to a social world in motion.¹ Considered by her contemporaries as the “Queen of Temperance” the world over and the president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) from 1879 to 1898, Willard believed temperance reform should be approached as one element in a spectrum of interrelated social changes. Willard biographer Ruth Bordin accordingly notes that Willard “treated temperance reform as part of a complex of related social issues that should be dealt with simultaneously.”² Of nineteenth-century reform more broadly, Al Lyons identifies two paths toward solving growing social problems: “One was to increase the governmental social programs to meet these needs, the other was to mobilize private sources of charity and philanthropy.”³ Willard recognized the power both of prohibition legislation and innovation through WCTU initiatives. Rather than opt for one path, she forged her own, connecting temperance to myriad other reform and social

movements, and organizing a cohort of white ribboners to advance creative solutions in the service of the temperance “crusade.”⁴ Economic inequality, alcoholism, prostitution, educational injustice, and racial prejudice all were taken up by Willard’s WCTU as interrelated issues that only the most expansive social and legal innovations could combat and ameliorate. This network of women and the reform movements it engaged was imagined by Willard as a wheel within a wheel, both in the WCTU organ, the *Union Signal*, as well as in her 1895 memoir on learning to ride the bicycle.

Willard’s approach to temperance reform was intersectional and entrepreneurial; she was unafraid to take risks to benefit the “great mass of feminine humanity” often overlooked by the men who led businesses and policy.⁵ Willard, working in an age in which “self-making was culturally defined as a white, male activity,” drew on consumer culture, business acumen, moral suasion, Christian progress, and social activism to advance temperance.⁶

Examining Willard’s temperance writings of the 1890s alongside her expansive “Do Everything” reform policy, this article positions Willard as a social entrepreneur whose temperance mission led to campaigns embracing controversial technologies and utilizing innovative commercial strategies to effect as much change as possible. Current scholarship on economics and social innovation characterizes social entrepreneurship as “a multidimensional construct involving the expression of entrepreneurially virtuous behaviour to achieve the social mission, a coherent unity of purpose and action in the face of moral complexity, the ability to recognise social value-creating opportunities, and key decision-making characteristics of innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking.”⁷ As scholars have recognized, “social entrepreneurship and social innovation are both about identifying a problem-solving opportunity to meet a social need.”⁸ The purpose, for Willard, was always the molding of a more perfect and just Christian society, one which necessitated women’s equity, co-equal participation in politics, and the sharing of economic power. In an 1891 presidential address, Willard identified a monopolizing work ethic in the entrepreneurship she witnessed of capitalists: “For combination is ‘a game that two can play at;’ the millionaires have taught us how, and the labor-tortoise is fast overtaking the capitalistic hare.”⁹ The WCTU membership had no shortage of laboring women and by the 1890s, with the development of the World’s WCTU, their reach was global: the WCTU “gathered around in every part of the globe groups of women who remained loyal and devoted to international organization.” The enterprise represented “a great human mosaic,” making the wheel a fitting emblem.¹⁰

In endorsing the bicycle in her memoir *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle* (1895) and through the broader campaign promoted in the *Union Signal* to raise funds for the Temperance Temple building in Chicago, Willard expanded

the mission of the WCTU organization to include social innovation and female entrepreneurialism. One significant aspect of Willard's social entrepreneurship lies in her open endorsement of the safety bicycle as a vehicle for the prevention of alcohol abuse and women's public mobility.¹¹ In implementing the bicycle in the service of temperance, Willard provided a new perspective on the scope and geographic range of women's activism.

Willard's memoir espoused a powerful message of activism, one that embraced the innovation of the bicycle as metonymic not only for temperance reform but also for reform movements more broadly. The implications of the bicycle's appearance in the pages of the *Union Signal* signify, among other things, the eventual acceptance of the bicycle for WCTU members. Likewise, Willard's *Union Signal* articles on the topic of the Temperance Temple campaign shed light on how she rhetorically maneuvered the introduction of controversial technology by crafting reform-specific uses for material items; wheels took on philosophical and material significance. As one of the central metaphors through which Willard and her WCTU partners shifted the WCTU's focus from the home to the world, the Temperance Temple campaign bespoke a higher mission for the WCTU under Willard's watch. It signified the architecture of the temperance movement as much as the bicycle symbolized its movement forward.

The bicycle was a consumer object rich in possibilities. From a vehicle for labor to a mechanism for hygienic exercise, the bicycle was widely recognized for its mental and physical benefits for men. Willard describes it as a vehicle for women conquering new worlds, an invention that enabled average citizens to enjoy "the swiftness of motion." The bicycle, in her eyes, was "the most fascinating feature of material life," the "steed that never tires."¹² Its significance to her temperance mission was immediate. Willard writes: "I had often mentioned in my temperance writings that the bicycle was perhaps our strongest ally in winning young men away from public-houses . . . So as a temperance reformer I always felt a strong attraction toward the bicycle, because it is the vehicle of so much harmless pleasure, and because the skills required in handling it requires those who mount to keep clear head and hands."¹³

That women laboring for social change should have access to such an invention was obvious. Willard imbued the bicycle with Christian credibility and social power, transforming a commercial object to a vehicle of Christian progress. In this way, Willard's bicycle narrative and the campaign she created around the wheel should be interpreted as evidence of her success as a social innovator and entrepreneur, a form of entrepreneurial activity that paralleled successes in business and other capitalist enterprises in the late nineteenth century.

Recently, economic historians and scholars in entrepreneurial studies are recog-

nizing more widely the accomplishments of women like Willard. As Susan M. Yohn has shown, female entrepreneurship in commercial markets was not publicly and widely celebrated. “If women’s business in this period remained small, undercapitalized, and limited in their reach and profit potential,” Yohn explains, “the parallel social reform organizations founded by women—among them the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the Young Woman’s Christian Association, and the Protestant home and foreign mission associations—saw tremendous growth both in numbers of members as well as in dollars collected.”¹⁴ Many female entrepreneurs aligned their projects or products with the household by showing how “their products enhanced the domestic arena by making their customers more attractive or led to the preparation of more nutritious meals.”¹⁵ Willard took the home protection cause outdoors and argued that women should take up bicycle riding in American cities and communities across the globe. To be sure, Willard’s Wheel Within a Wheel campaign is entrepreneurial in nature, as it was defined by “the imperative to drive social change, and it is that potential payoff, with its lasting, transformational benefit to society that sets the field and its practitioners apart.”¹⁶

Willard’s interest in the bicycle responded to American cultural questioning of whether women should publicly pursue new technologies and become more visible and vocal in the body politic. As a Christian temperance spokesperson, Willard’s experience in learning to ride the bicycle was tantamount to approval and endorsement. Willard and the organization she led profited from her social capital. The bicycle and its concomitant possibilities for women’s mobility became an extension of Willard’s “Do Everything” reform motto. Described by Willard as “an evolution, as inevitable as any traced by any naturalist,” the “Do Everything Policy” consolidated the “blessed trinity of movements, Prohibition, Woman’s Liberation, and Labor’s Uplift.”¹⁷ The imagery of the wheel encapsulated the interconnectedness of WCTU work with suffrage, civil rights, and healthy living away from realities that threatened families.

Writing was one of Willard’s widely used tactics in temperance reform, directing her “pen-work for temperance” in part to recruit new members to the WCTU and in part to chronicle her “uppermost thought” about temperance.¹⁸ Willard’s writings on the bicycle began appearing in the columns of the *Union Signal* in 1895. In an article from the February 28, 1895, issue, Willard announced her endorsement of the “Wheel within Wheels” Temperance Temple fundraising campaign, which was initiated by white-ribboner Matilda B. Carse.¹⁹ With the building of the Temple came risks that not all members of the WCTU were ready to take on—specifically troubling for WCTU members were the financial and personal risks involved in women stepping beyond the perceived boundaries of their gender.²⁰ In the pages of the *Union Signal*, Willard confirmed the importance of collective responsibility for funding WCTU headquarters, affirming that the Temperance Temple (to which she assigned the appellation,

“Our House Beautiful”) was a cause worthy of widespread WCTU support.²¹ Although this article initially served to sanction Carse’s fundraising campaign for the Temperance Temple, Willard took the opportunity to link the campaign with her upcoming memoir. In March, the WCTU publishing organization printed *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, in which Willard proposes using the bicycle as a vehicle for temperance work and as a metaphor for learning to be “an active and diligent worker in the world.”²²

In the March 14, 1895, issue of *The Union Signal*, less than one month after Willard espoused her philosophy of the wheel as a reform tool and its connection to the Temple campaign in her article “Wheels Within Wheels,” Carse’s regular column, “Temperance Temple Items,” echoed similar sentiments. Entreating WCTU members to join in the Temple Wheel campaign Carse begins: “We love life and motion. We get impatient even if a train is detained a little over schedule time on account of an overheated wheel. This brings me back again to the subject of Wheels and the impossibility of doing anything in a civilized land without them. This long, heavily laden train could not move a peg if it was not for the great wheels that glide under it so smooth and swift.”²³ Carse no doubt drew from the possibility found in Willard’s enlistment of the wheel for reform—all that was needed were “willing hands to give [the Temperance Wheels] a whirl among a dozen of their friends” wasting not a dime in the process.²⁴ Evoking Willard’s *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, Carse goes on: “Although I admit to having a *Wheel* in my head, yet I desire to be fair to the matter and not give too much credit to them.”²⁵ Carse’s use of italics implies that Willard’s *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, or at least a version of it, was instrumental in forming the Temple Wheel campaign.

Equally as important to her readers were the rules of the Temperance Temple wheel campaign that Willard described in her endorsement, including how Willard and Carse planned to use little cardboard wheels for collecting donations. The wheels featured an outer ring of open spaces in which contributors were to affix a coin (see **Illustration 1**). Along the inside of the wheels, room was provided to scrawl each benefactor’s name along the spokes. Another key feature of the wheel campaign were the prizes awarded for completed Temperance Temple wheels that Willard described: “every person who slips a dime under the little red cover, of which there are twelve on each wheel, will receive a handsome picture of the Woman’s Temperance Temple, and every person who wins a dozen others thus to put in a dime receives any one of a variety of prizes.”²⁶ The power of the campaign and the democratic possibilities lay in commemorating each contributor, not in memorializing Willard. The cardboard Temperance Temple wheels and the prizes associated with broad participation support Willard’s opinion that the WCTU members “strongly feel that the actual vitality of money is in proportion to the number of people back of it, in it and engaged in dispensing it for noble purposes.”²⁷ The contributors would see their money come to fruition in the building and in the programs run out of its offices. The Temperance

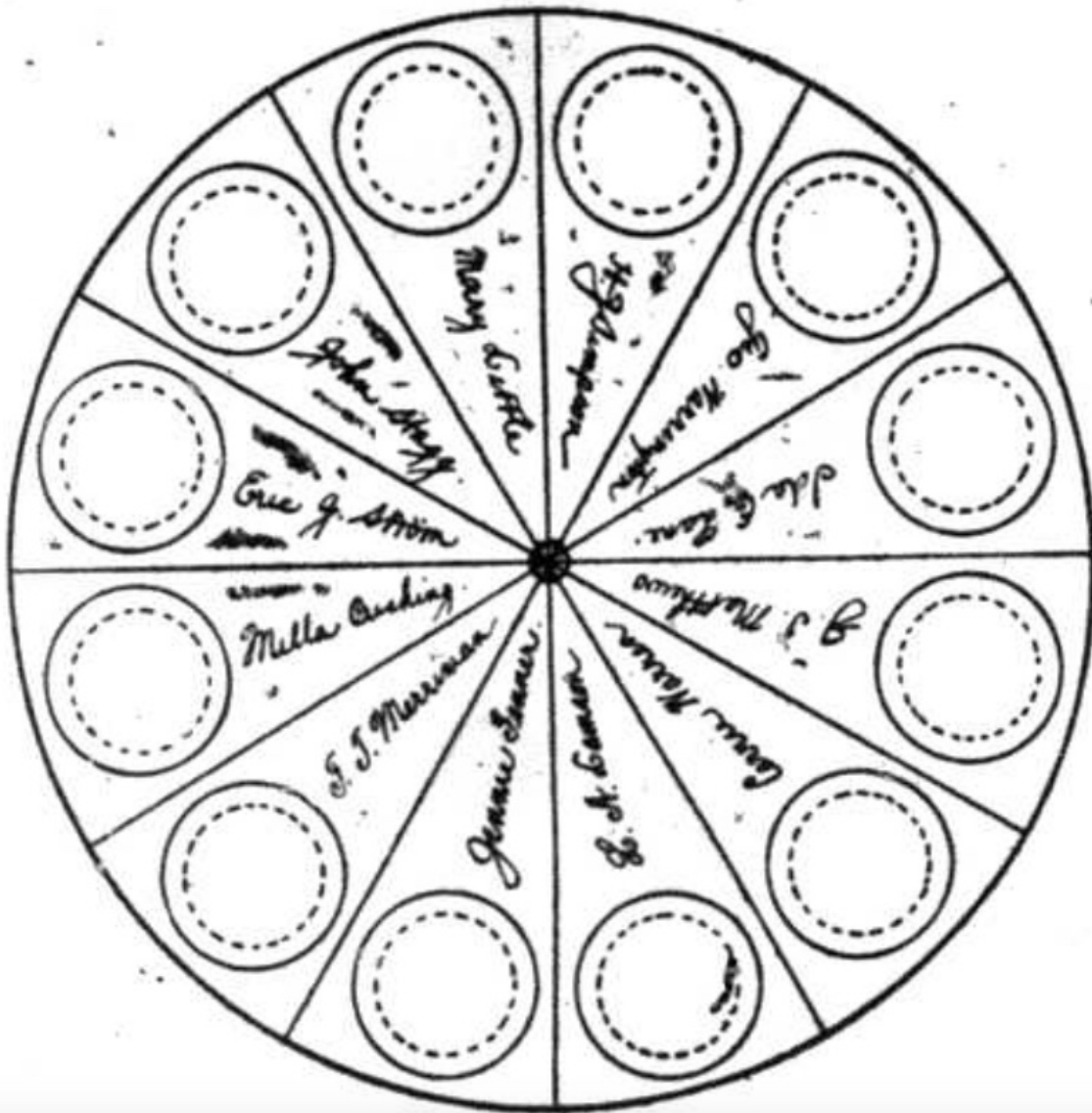


Illustration 1: Temperance Temple Wheel.

From *Union Signal*, March 28, 1895.

Temple was an entrepreneurial enterprise, empowering women to see the “vitality” of economic investment. Urging support from her WCTU sisters, Willard ends the article with a call for communal support: “We want to see the wheels go round.” Willard thereby enlists the wheels of the Temperance Temple campaign for the greater “weal of the human family.”²⁸

It did not take long for Willard and Carse’s Temple Wheel campaign to gain momentum. By June 4, 1895, Carse was reporting that the WCTU “was receiving on an average fifty filled Wheels daily.”²⁹ This level of participation in the Temple Wheel campaign was promising, but not as enthusiastic as Willard and Carse would have hoped.

The fact that they had “placed [their] mark at a thousand [filled wheels] per day,” and the discrepancy between this hope and reality speaks to the enormity of the Temperance Temple enterprise. Despite the popularity of the Temple Wheel campaign and both Willard and Carse’s fundraising efforts, the WCTU could not raise enough money to buy the Temperance Temple. After Willard’s death in February of 1898, WCTU leaders voted to abandon the Temple project and, despite member response to continue with the ill-fated venture, the WCTU severed ties with the Temple suffering a financial loss of roughly half a million dollars in the process.³⁰

On March 28, 1895, one month after Willard’s “Wheels Within Wheels” appeared, and merely two weeks after Carse’s column adopting Willard’s wheel metaphor appeared in the *Union Signal*, an advertisement announced that Willard’s memoir on her experience with the bicycle, titled *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, was available through the Woman’s Temperance Publishing Association (see **Illustration 2** and **Illustration 3**). Part bicycle manual, part personal memoir, and part recruiting tool, the “fascinating little volume” came to life in the pages of the *Union Signal* alongside the first WCTU printed bicycle ads and the Temperance Temple campaign. Indeed, the history of Willard’s *A Wheel Within a Wheel* is the history of how she sought, as she herself explained, to take a “pre-emption claim upon the press to spread the temperance propaganda.”³¹ Although *A Wheel Within a Wheel* chronicles Willard’s adventures learning to master the new safety bicycle, this memoir also offered her WCTU comrades realistic insights on reform and technology. The bicycle offered a connection between the foundation of Christian spirituality and the futurism born of technological advancements. Willard connected them in a journal entry in February of 1896: “I woke thinking: Is it possible that after all, I am to be living on the planet Earth not only when the sources of the Nile, the heart of Africa and the secrets of

A Wheel Within a Wheel

**HOW I
LEARNED
TO RIDE
THE BICYCLE**



BY
Frances Willard

In her inimitable style Miss Willard tells in this dainty little volume her experience in learning to master a “steel steed,” and as she graphically portrays the various situations leading from many failures to ultimate success, she has interwoven in delightful “side-talks” some exceedingly helpful and practical suggestions as to how failures and discouragements may be turned to success in life, never losing opportunity, as is her wont, to say that which ennobles and uplifts. It is really a fascinating little volume, appealing strongly to all that is best in physical and moral development.

SEVEN FULL-PAGE HALF-TONE ILLUSTRATIONS....

PRICE BEAUTIFULLY BOUND IN BUCKRAM CLOTH 50 cents

Tastefully designed cover in ink and silver.

**WOMAN'S TEMPERANCE PUBLISHING ASS'N,
The Temple, Chicago.**

Illustration 2: Advertisement for *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*. From *Union Signal*, April 4, 1895.

Do You Possess Miss Willard's
Bicycle Book?
IF NOT, PURCHASE ONE IMMEDIATELY



HOW I LEARNED
TO RIDE THE
BICYCLE

شور شور شور

Written in Miss Willard's own inimitable style, with six full-page illustrations of the author learning to ride.

The illustrations alone are worth the price of the book.

PRICE, POSTPAID, 50c.
W. T. P. A., The Temple, CHICAGO.

Advertisers like to know what paper pays them best. Always mention *The Union Signal* when writing.

Illustration 3: Advertisement for *A Wheel Within A Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*.

From *Union Signal*, September 2, 1895.

with balance and posture this time by two “well-disposed young women,” Willard steadies herself atop the machine.³⁵ Third, with one assistant walking alongside her holding the center-bar, Willard slowly begins her ride. In the final stage, Willard pedals at last unassisted, turning and dismounting by herself. Connecting her own experience of learning to ride the bicycle to reform efforts, Willard writes: “It is the same with all reforms: sometimes they seem to lag, then they barely balance, then they track and tumble to one side; but all they need is a new impetus at the right moment on the right angle, and away they go again as merrily as if they had never

the poles are hunted out, but when electricity is harnessed, printing is done by steam, the flying machine is invented (as a sequel to the bicycle where we will... take our leave of Earth) and that by phonograph or telephone or cathode ray or spectroscope we are to hear the sounds & see the sights that make the Life Immortal sure?”³² Similarly, in the *Union Signal*, Willard wrote publicly of the possibilities of the bicycle as a means of advancing temperance. Side by side, readers encountered instructions on mechanical bicycle function, dress suggestions, resolution of the medical debate over women’s riding postures, and an explicit call for the bicycle as an agent of reform. In her convincing and didactic tone, she illuminates for her readers the lesson that success in life and in temperance reform may be achieved by “decision and precision.”³³

Believing that science and technology “improves upon old ways just as reforms improve society,” Willard advertised the bicycle as a tool for WCTU-sponsored activity. Two principles must first be realized before the riding process begins, she asserted: first, the goal; second, the drive requisite to reach such a goal. These principles lead into the four-staged evolution of Willard’s riding history. First, aided by three Englishmen who hold the bicycle in place, Willard climbs aboard the saddle in a “feminine bicycler’s first position,” namely one with a noticeable “lack of balance.”³⁴ Second, assisted

threatened to stop at all.” The bicycle is the “new impetus” that the temperance movement needed to “go again as merrily as if they had never threatened to stop.”³⁶

Accepting wholeheartedly that the bicycle “meets all the conditions and will ere long come within reach of all,” Willard invests the bicycle with a special value to her “comrades in the white-ribbon army of temperance workers.”³⁷ The reasons for this are plenty, among them: the bicycle provides natural pleasure, the bicycle offers a “new implement of power,” the bicycle is accessible to most ages and to both men and women.³⁸ Astride her bicycle, Willard breathed in new possibilities “amid the delightful surroundings of the great outdoors, and inspired by the bird-songs, the color and fragrance of an English posy-garden, in the company of devoted and pleasant comrades,” she made herself “master of the most remarkable, ingenious, and inspiring motor ever yet devised upon this planet.”³⁹

Willard was confident that the “reason” behind women riding bicycles would increase upon the outmoded, conservative “precedent” that women should remain in the domestic sphere.⁴⁰ Significantly, Willard connected the bicycle with domestic ideology and reform in a way that embraced women’s use of transportation technology, rather than castigating women’s interest in a realm of experience (technology) that was valued primarily for its contributions to male, public, and commercial culture. In contrast to popular romantic bicycle narratives in which the freedom of the bicycle encourages women to get out of the house into which their marriage vows shut them,⁴¹ Willard extolled the virtues of riding for the family and with the additive motivation of recruiting others to the temperance mission. The “good fellowship and mutual understanding between men and women who take the road together,” Willard suggested, would greatly advantage humanity, who could share life’s “hardships and [rejoice] in the poetry of motion through landscapes breathing nature’s inexhaustible charm and skyscapes lifting the heart from what is to what shall be hereafter.”⁴²

The bicycle was perfectly matched, in Willard’s mind, to “the capital of humanity.”⁴³ After realizing the mobility that the bicycle offered herself, Willard extolled the fact that “the physical development of humanity’s mother-half would be wonderfully advanced by that universal introduction of the bicycle sure to come within the next few years” when the safety bicycle would become affordable to the majority.⁴⁴ She even went so far as invoking commerce as a unifying force: “It is for the interest of great commercial monopolies that this should be so, since if women patronize the wheel the number of buyers will be twice as large.”⁴⁵ In this assertion, Willard alludes to the potential economic and social profit in bicycles that was harnessed in the advertising campaigns of the 1890s. As Ellen Gruber Garvey reports, by the end of the bicycle craze in the late 1890s, between one quarter and one third of the bicycle

market belonged to women.⁴⁶ Within the commerce of the bicycle, Willard identifies a unifying force for women that went beyond the act of consumption and into acts of reform, specifically rational dress reform. For, as Willard noted, “If women ride they must, when riding, dress more rationally If they do this many prejudices as to what they may be allowed to wear will melt away.”⁴⁷ Likewise, advertisers used the cache of WCTU reformers in their *Union Signal* marketing campaigns, as evident in an ad for the “Lady Somerset” model.

In addition to the reform message of *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, the form and content of the book also supports reading it alongside the Temperance Temple campaign. Willard drew upon a collage-style that incorporated several of the topics under discussion in the *Union Signal* dating from the late 1880s through the beginning of 1895. Admixed with her commentary on learning to ride the bicycle, for instance, are Willard’s personal reflections and a poem in response to the announcement of Ulysses S. Grant’s death on July 23, 1885. The collage effect is carried further in the penultimate chapter, titled “Ethereal Episode,” in which Willard details an 1886 tricycle accident. As a result of this accident, Willard was prescribed ether while the doctors reset her broken arm. In her reflections, she deplores human cruelty and exults in principles of Christian belonging. She wrote, “Then there settled down upon me the most vivid and pervading sense of the love of God that I have ever known . . . in Him we live, and move, and have our being.”⁴⁸ While this episode and Grant’s death occurred years earlier, Willard provided a vision in which God confirms that her movement and actions are spiritually sanctioned.

Coupled with this spiritual vision, Willard’s reform philosophy was imbued with a forward and upward motion: “It is the curse of life that nearly everyone looks down. But the microscope will never set you free; you must glue your eyes to the telescope for ever and a day. Look up and off and on and out.”⁴⁹ With her eyes on the broader picture and her goals propelling her through the last decade of the nineteenth century, Willard embraced the potentials of technology in creating a community of reform-minded young women. Of the significance of the bicycle Willard wrote, “I began to feel that myself plus the bicycle equaled myself plus the world, upon whose spinning wheel we must all learn to ride, or fall into the sluiceways of oblivion and despair.”⁵⁰ Through her own experience of diligently learning to ride the bicycle, Willard found a new form of power and opened up a wider world for women all the while beseeching others to join her, to “go thou and do likewise.”⁵¹ As Edith Mayo attests in her introduction of a recent edition of *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, the book “quickly became a bestseller and no doubt encouraged other women to take up the bicycle” if not to join the temperance cause.⁵²

In “Wheels Within Wheels,” Willard draws on the innovation and durability of the

wheel technology, connecting these qualities to the temperance movement. “The wheel has always been an institution,” Willard remarks, “whether attached to the market cart, the swift express train or the silently gliding bicycle, it is a ‘thing of beauty and a joy forever.’”⁵³ A wheel alone may move, but “for real execution nothing succeeds like ‘wheels within wheels.’”⁵⁴ This Biblical reference, derived from Ezekiel 1:16, perfectly expresses Willard’s methodology of connecting temperance to many other areas of social improvement as well as her approach to the WCTU. Precisely as humanity is linked to all of God’s creatures in Ezekiel’s testament, Willard’s use of this Biblical reference asserts that in some fundamental way the temperance movement permeates all aspects of life: “Everything is not in the Temperance Reform, but the Temperance Reform should be in everything.”⁵⁵ Significantly, Willard assigns the wheel with dual functions. First, “wheels are what move things.” Second, the temperance movement “cannot get along without wheels” because the WCTU has “a boundless crop of goodwill to convey back and forth from the Headquarters of the WCTU to every home that loves the white ribbon and what it represents.”⁵⁶ Thus, Willard’s deployment of Temperance Temple wheels not only propelled the fundraising movement, but also connected each white ribboner to the larger membership of the WCTU. Connecting women to the WCTU mission in their daily lives was one way that Willard succeeded in making strong involvement possible for women across socio-economic classes. Every woman could do their part, contributing what they could afford given their family circumstances.

In support of the Temperance Temple campaign unfolding in the *Union Signal*’s weekly column, Willard wrote “Silver wheels are now in motion as symbols of our heart’s devotion, and will roll fast and far without commotion to make our House Beautiful our very own forever and a day.”⁵⁷ The more wheels, the more motion; the more motion, the more WCTU members to help contribute to the Temperance Temple, according to Willard’s growth mindset. As the spokesperson behind the WCTU campaign to solicit subscriptions to pay off the debt of the “Temperance Temple” (nicknamed “Willard Hall”), Willard’s article offers a memorable slogan to unite WCTU members: each member is a wheel in her own local WCTU union; each local union is a wheel within the national WCTU.⁵⁸ For Willard, the metaphor of wheels within wheels provides a tangible and emotional linkage between WCTU members and the temperance movement more broadly.

The connections between the Temperance Temple campaign and American business spirit abounded. Willard acknowledged that the wheel had long been the driving force behind capitalist institutions. Certainly, Willard’s Temperance Temple campaign very literally could not get along without the members’ participation in filling the cardboard Temple Wheels, however, Willard’s assertion carried with it more significance. Indeed, for Willard, the “wheels,” which she foresaw powering her reform

work, and that of the WCTU, referred not only to the Temple Wheels, but also to the ever-growing army of activists she imagined riding atop the bicycle, Willard's reformers in motion pursuing radical changes in society and in politics.

Ostensibly, the drive to raise money to finally own the WCTU's "House Beautiful" was at the heart of the Temperance Temple campaign. In her weekly column, titled "Temperance Temple Items," which was devoted to the campaign, Willard's sister reformer, Carse, implored WCTU members to give to the cause by appealing to a sense of collective ownership among those who participated in the fundraising drive: "Think how inspiring it would be if we would all take hold and help to pay for our own House Beautiful. We can never feel that it is ours until we own some little part in it by right of paying towards it."⁵⁹ The push to make good on the WCTU investment of the Temperance Temple was, indeed, a significant aspect of the Temperance Temple campaign; however, Willard's description of the rules for filling the Temple Wheels implicitly outlined a plan for further WCTU recruitment. Willard subtly aligned the pecuniary importance of the campaign with the importance of spreading the spirit of temperance: "We would a thousand times rather have one of the Temple wheels in the sacred hand of every little child that has taken the Loyal Temperance Legion pledge than to have a million dollars in the bank."⁶⁰ Temperate and participatory citizens held more value than the dollar. Willard redefined profit itself. The passing of Temple Wheels from "hand to hand with the greatest readiness" served as a way to yield a high collective return with low individual investment at the same time that it spread the temperance message much farther than if Willard had limited her call for donations to WCTU members alone.⁶¹

In "Wheels Within Wheels," Willard extended her spiritual philosophy of the wheel within a wheel to her entrepreneurial visions of future reform. For Willard, the "wheels" of the temperance movement and other nineteenth-century causes were inevitably linked to the "wheels" of future progressive reform movements. Within Willard's rhetoric of association is the assumption that reform movements both depend on and build upon previous movements. The fact that Willard saw, as part of her mission, the importance of establishing a strong foundation for future reform movements suggests that she understood her position as a figure of prominence in nineteenth-century America, a figure whose life and work could be used as a model. In an interview with Christian writer and journalist George T.B. Davis near the end of her life, Willard communicates a sense of the reformer as eternally active, striving to help those in need even in the afterlife. Willard looks to the future and sees a series of reform movements not unlike those of her day: "There will be other reforms and reformers when we are gone," reforms that are "as vital as any I have mentioned."⁶² Willard's widespread employment of the concept of a wheel within a wheel served to place herself and the WCTU within the "world of tempted humanity [whose mission

was] to organize the motherhood . . . for the peace and purity, the protection and exaltation of its homes."⁶³ This conception was the basis for Willard's proposals for future WCTU reform measures.

Willard connected her vision for the future of temperance reform work to the wheels of the bicycle and WCTU recruitment in concrete ways. First, she identified a popular and novel substitute—the bicycle—for the harmful saloon that lured so many young men from their domestic sanctuaries. She urged her fellow white-ribboners to “proceed upon the principle that we are not organizing groups of men by themselves; we wish to let the home people go together to their amusements. The bicycle is proving that this can already be done.”⁶⁴

Husbands and wives should cultivate similar “pleasures,” but the environment of the saloon is the “enemy of the home.”⁶⁵ Who better to expel the temptation of such an enemy than experienced white-ribboners? Willard called attention to “the constantly growing participation of women” in reform efforts that she deemed “municipal housekeeping.”⁶⁶ Willard defended women's right to ride the bicycle, couching her defense in the language of home protection and envisioning the bicycle as a substitute for the saloon. The logic of Willard's “Wheel Within Wheels” philosophy built on women's traditional roles in the home: “Women can ‘housekeep’ out of doors as well as within, and they will help to furnish many of the public comforts of life that men have overlooked.”⁶⁷ Indeed, one aspect of this public cleansing included injecting the WCTU's purifying message into nineteenth-century print culture.

Taking into consideration the extensive attention paid to Willard as an innovative reformer, it is unfortunate that the significance of her *A Wheel Within a Wheel* writings and campaign have been overlooked, and that no attention is paid to Willard as an exemplar of American women's social entrepreneurship.⁶⁸ Willard's contributions to suffrage and the women's rights movement has been examined by scholars, most recently by Alison M. Parker in *Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-Century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State* (2010). Parker describes Willard as a “pragmatic political strategist” who “provided an alternative rationale for woman suffrage and women's citizenship by focusing on the needs of civil society.”⁶⁹ Parker, Bordin, and others rightly have been critical of Willard for not moving far enough to include and support black WCTU members. This has contributed to a reading of Willard's ideas on individual liberty as comprehensively restrictive in nature. Around the concept of leisure and personal recreation specifically, Parker argues that “Willard's political theory explicitly addressed the necessity of passing laws to protect people by regulating and limiting their individual liberties.”⁷⁰ While it is true that Willard found saloons and intemperate recreation hazardous individually and politically, her sanctioning of the bicycle for women was tantamount to accepting women's public

activity, an expansion of the roles Willard saw fit for women in society. The notion of women utilizing a new technology to move more and travel further individually amplified women's social liberties. Because Willard envisioned women's activism as penetrating all aspects of life, especially the protection of the home and family, individual health and physical wellness, and above all civic participation were necessary to furthering the WCTU agenda. She wanted women to do everything they could to participate in bettering their world.

A significant aspect of her vision thus involved putting ideas into social action. Willard's *A Wheel Within a Wheel* book and related Union Signal print materials are evidence of how Willard put her ideas into action during her WCTU presidency. As Richard W. Leeman puts it in *"Do Everything Reform": The Oratory of Frances E. Willard* (1992), "For Willard, as for many late nineteenth century millennialists, the signs of a 'new day' were all around her" and she used them to her utmost advantage.⁷¹ Willard's memoir, newspaper articles, and her presence in the Temperance Temple marketing campaign are evidence of her widespread use of bicycle (wheel) imagery for temperance reform and her ability to create new roles for women activists in the service of eradicating intemperance. Marketing the bicycle, peppering the *Union Signal* and other newspapers with *Wheel Within a Wheel* ads targeting women and their families, and other business strategies were signs of the WCTU's way forward.

This essay has emphasized Willard's *A Wheel Within a Wheel* and the Temperance Temple campaign in the context of social entrepreneurship, despite scholarly readings that relegate *A Wheel Within a Wheel* to the insignificance of a quaint personal account of one woman's "joys of cycling."⁷² By 1897, Willard's passion for the bicycle was firmly connected to the WCTU mission. In her presidential address that year, Willard declared, "Every level headed bicyclist and every wheeling woman is the drinker's natural foe."⁷³ For Willard and other WCTU reformers, 1897 was a red-letter year. Quoting the *American Gazette*, Willard announced a decline in liquor consumption, attributing the temperance victory to "hard times and the bicycle."⁷⁴ For Willard, the bicycle provided a perfect lesson on the incompatibility of the progress of civilization and alcohol usage, for "no bicyclist would permit a man under the influence of liquor, let alone a drunkard, in his company."⁷⁵ Temperance was one of the nineteenth-century's great reform movements, and Frances Willard was its primary entrepreneur. Willard rose to her highest status during the 1890s with her support of the Temperance Temple office building, her multiple WCTU commissioned publications, and her ongoing efforts to connect temperance reform to other political and social justice projects, including supporting women's right to exercise and ride the bicycle. Willard was remembered for her enterprising, entrepreneurial spirit. As one person recalled her impact: "It is not often that rare talent given to one woman by which she can bring so much to pass . . . She knew no days of leisure; on the cars, out walking or driving, her

hand was always busy making notes, or her brain planning, thinking, devising some new method to help forward the welfare of all the various enterprises with which she was connected.”⁷⁶ Willard's writing impacted women's daily lives by defending their use of a vehicle that required no chaperone, and by educating women on the spiritual and familial significance of outdoor activities. Willard used the bicycle in the service of temperance, and turned an outdoor activity into a spiritual act.

Notes

- 1 “The Bicycle as a Reformer,” *The Union Signal*, June 13, 1895.
- 2 Ruth Bordin, *Frances Willard: A Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 115.
- 3 Al Lyons, “GBS as Philanthropist and Social Entrepreneur: Bridging Nineteenth-Century Charity and Twenty-First-Century Social Innovation,” *Shaw* 36 no. 1 (2016): 111, DOI: [10.5325/shaw.36.1.0107](https://doi.org/10.5325/shaw.36.1.0107).
- 4 In her explanation of the founding of the WCTU, Willard discusses the 1877 decision to name the white ribbon as the official badge of the organization. After some debate, Willard dubbed the temperance cause the White Ribbon movement and members of the WCTU became known affectionately as “white ribboners.” See Frances E. Willard, *Do Everything: A Handbook for the World's White Ribboners* (Chicago: The Woman's Temperance Publishing Association, 1895), 21.
- 5 Frances E. Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle with Some Reflections by the Way* (1895; Bedford: Applewood Books, 1997), 14.
- 6 Sylvia D. Hoffert, “Female Self-Making in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Women's History* 20 no. 3 (2008): 36, DOI: [10.1353/jowh.0.0027](https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.0.0027).
- 7 Gillian Sullivan Mort, Jay Weerawardena, and Kashonia Carnegia, “Social Entrepreneurship: Towards Conceptualisation,” *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 8 no. 1 (2003): 76, DOI: [10.1002/nvsm.202](https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.202).
- 8 Wendy Phillips, Hazel Lee, Abby Ghobadian, Nicholas O'Regan, and Peter James, “Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship: A Systematic Review,” *Group & Organization Management* 40, no. 3 (2015): 442, DOI: [10.1177/105960114560063](https://doi.org/10.1177/105960114560063).
- 9 Frances E. Willard, “Address at the Woman's National Council of the United States” (speech, Washington, D.C., February 22–25, 1891), *Library of Congress*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://loc.gov/item/ca00003105/>.
- 10 Anna A. Gordon, *The Beautiful Life of Frances E. Willard: A Memorial Volume* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publishing Association, 1898), 344.
- 11 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 12.
- 12 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 11.
- 13 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 12–13.
- 14 Susan M. Yohn, “Crippled Capitalists: The Inscription of Economic Dependence and the Challenge of Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Feminist Economics* 12, nos. 1–2 (2006): 102, DOI: [10.1080/13545700500508270](https://doi.org/10.1080/13545700500508270).
- 15 Yohn, “Crippled Capitalists,” 102.

- 16 Roger L. Martin and Sally Osberg, "Social Entrepreneurship: The Case for Definition," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 5, no. 2 (2007): 30.
- 17 Frances E. Willard, "Fourteenth Presidential Address (1893)," in *Let Something Good Be Said: Speeches and Writings of Frances E. Willard*, ed. Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford and Amy R. Slagell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 180.
- 18 Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 503.
- 19 The Temperance Temple campaign was first introduced by Carse in the January 17, 1895, issue of the *Union Signal*. In it, Carse encouraged WCTU members "young and old" to "have a part in paying for the 'House Beautiful': "We have devised a plan whereby during 1895 . . . especially those who are too poor to give anything themselves, can by loving service become owners of a few bricks in the building." See Matilda B. Carse, "Temperance Temple Items," *Union Signal*, January 17, 1895.
- 20 Rachel Bohlmann, "Our House Beautiful: The Woman's Temple and the WCTU Effort to Establish Place in Downtown Chicago, 1887–1898," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 111, DOI: [10.1353/jowh.1999.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.1999.0001).
- 21 "Our House Beautiful," *The Union Signal*, July 4, 1895. When Willard called the Temperance Temple "Our House Beautiful," she purposively encouraged each WCTU member to become part of a plan in which "no one person is heavily encumbered" by the duty to seek donations to pay for this ambitious enterprise, but rather "all" members would be "better for giving a dime and inducing twelve others to do the same."
- 22 Willard, *A Wheel Within Wheel*, 9.
- 23 Matilda B. Carse, "Temperance Temple Items," *The Union Signal*, March 14, 1895, 5.
- 24 Carse, "Temperance Temple Items," March 14, 1895, 5.
- 25 Carse, "Temperance Temple Items," March 14, 1895, 5.
- 26 Frances Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," *The Union Signal*, February 28, 1895, 8.
- 27 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 28 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 29 Matilda B. Carse, "Temperance Temple Items," *The Union Signal*, June 4, 1895, 5.
- 30 See "Carse, Matilda Bradley (Nov. 19, 1835–June 3, 1917)," in *Notable American Women: 1607–1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), *Credo Reference*, March 24, 2010.
- 31 Frances E. Willard, "Fifteenth Presidential Address (1894)," in *Let Something Good Be Said: Speeches and Writings of Frances E. Willard*, ed. Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford and Amy R. Slagell (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 217.
- 32 Frances E. Willard, "February 25, 1896, Mobile Ala.," *Frances Willard Digital Journals*, <http://www.franceswillardjournals.org/browse-page.php?pageid=664027>.
- 33 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 74.
- 34 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 20.
- 35 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 21.
- 36 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 28–29.
- 37 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 72–73.
- 38 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 73.

- 39 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 75.
- 40 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 39.
- 41 For a critique of riding romance narratives, see Sarah Wintle, "Horses, Bikes and Automobiles: New Woman on the Move," in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, ed. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 66–78.
- 42 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 40.
- 43 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 38.
- 44 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 38.
- 45 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 38–39.
- 46 Ellen Gruber Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle: Advertising-Supported Magazines and Scorching Women," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1995): 95, DOI: [10.2307/2713325](https://doi.org/10.2307/2713325).
- 47 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 39.
- 48 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 67–68.
- 49 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 17.
- 50 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 27.
- 51 Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, 75.
- 52 Edith Mayo, "'Do Everything': The Life and Work of Frances Willard," in *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle: Reflections of an Influential 19th Century Woman*, ed. Carol O'Hare (Sunnyvale: Fair Oaks Publishing Company, 1991), 12.
- 53 Frances Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 54 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 55 Willard, *Do Everything*, 20.
- 56 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 57 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 58 In 1890, the WCTU began construction on a skyscraper in downtown Chicago that would be known officially as the Woman's Temple (although the *Union Signal* referred to it both as the Temperance Temple and Willard Hall). Matilda Bradley Carse, founder and president of the local Chicago WCTU, ran the construction project and oversaw the financial plan, including her vision of how the revenue expected from the Temple tenants could help fund WCTU projects, keeping the WCTU self-sufficient. Formerly, the WCTU rented from the WMCA, which terminated its agreement in 1883. See Bohlmann, "Our House Beautiful," 110–16, 128n2.
- 59 Matilda B. Carse, "Temperance Temple Items," *Union Signal*, November 28, 1895, 5.
- 60 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 61 Willard, "Wheels Within Wheels," 8.
- 62 George T.B. Davis, "The Greatest American Woman," *Our Day*, no. 18 (1898): 107–116, *Temperance and Prohibition*, March 3, 2010, <https://prohibition.osu.edu/willard/last-interview>.
- 63 Frances Willard, "Extract from Miss Willard's Address at the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the B.W.T.W., June 1, 1896," *Union Signal*, June 11, 1896, 9.
- 64 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 101.
- 65 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 102.

- 66 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 102.
- 67 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 102.
- 68 See Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), for a study of Willard's involvement in the WCTU and temperance reform; see Gruber Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle," and Lisa S. Strange, "The Bicycle, Women's Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton," *Women's Studies* 31, no. 5 (2002): 609–626, DOI: [10.1080/00497870214048](https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870214048), for examinations of the bicycle as a tool for reform. Both studies mention Willard's memoir and use of the bicycle for temperance reform merely in passing.
- 69 Alison M. Parker, *Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-Century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 176.
- 70 Parker, *Articulating Rights*, 152.
- 71 Richard W. Leeman, "Do Everything Reform": *The Oratory of Frances E. Willard* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 81.
- 72 See Strange, "The Bicycle." Strange situates Willard's book as an insignificant tangent to the history of the bicycle's liberating power arguing that Elizabeth Cady Stanton's vision of the bicycle as a means for reform plays a much more central role in that history.
- 73 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 83.
- 74 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 82.
- 75 Willard, "President's Address, 1897," 82.
- 76 Gordon, *The Beautiful Life*, 338.

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Creative Extinction

Serial Cycles of De-Extinction and Re-Extinction in Resurrection Business

Michael Fuchs

Abstract

This article discusses the videogame *Jurassic World Evolution* (Frontier Developments, 2018). As a business simulation, *Jurassic World Evolution* makes playable—and asks players to perform—a serialized cycle of de-extinction and re-extinction: dinosaurs are resurrected only to be wiped out again when a successor that is “better, louder, with more teeth” (to quote *Jurassic World*’s operations manager Claire Dearing) becomes available. The revenue players generate is thus founded on a cycle of extinction, de-extinction, and re-extinction. In so doing, the videogame suggests that de-extinction does not promise a future primarily defined by the overcoming of extinction and the becoming-real of the dream of re-establishing natural abundance through techno-scientific means, but rather a future characterized by an exponential growth in serialized extinctions, made possible by techno-science. That the videogame puts players in charge of both finances and developing their dinosaur “assets” draws players’ attention to molecular biology as a new place of production. Hence, resurrection science and its biocapitalist entanglements not only exploit past extinctions but rather suggest that this biocapitalist venture is based on speculation—reaping seemingly unlimited future profits from a potentially never-ending cycle of extinctions, de-extinctions, and re-extinctions.

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Creative Extinction

Serial Cycles of De-Extinction and Re-Extinction in Resurrection Business

Michael Fuchs

In *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor Frankenstein “examine[s] the causes of life.” In the course of his studies, he concludes that “life and death” are “ideal bounds” that he needs to “break through” before he will be able to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter.”¹ Frankenstein showcases hubris in this passage and embodies an all-too prevalent tendency among enlightened human beings inhabiting the Global North: to view limits—especially “naturally” imposed ones—as challenges that need to be overcome before mastering and controlling them. By embracing this spirit, humankind has “become a global geophysical force,” which “represents a profound shift in the relationship between humans and the rest of nature.”² However, with great power comes great responsibility, and humanity has not been up to the task. Global warming, ocean acidification, plastic pollution, biodiversity loss—we all know the phenomena associated with the environmental crisis. And while many of these consequences of anthropogenic activities may have been unintended, humans are not innocent actors on the stage of life. After all, as the extreme metal band Cattle Decapitation puts it on their Anthropocenic album *Death Atlas* (2019), today, “we know that we’re wrong, / we know what we’ve done, / yet we still carry on.”³ Indeed, one of the reasons why we still continue topping our greenhouse gas emissions (among others) on an annual basis (unless a pandemic stops us) is that the various dimensions of the environmental crisis are so massive in scale that they seem incomprehensible. Since these phenomena cannot be fully understood (or not grasped at all), they can neither be controlled nor mastered. The Anthropocene condition may thus evoke feelings of powerlessness and cause paralysis.

But it doesn’t have to be all gloom and doom. In the introduction to his edited volume *After Extinction* (2018), Richard Grusin raises a seemingly simple but, in fact, very complex and profound question: “What comes after extinction?”⁴ While some might say, “There is no ‘after extinction.’ Extinction is the end,” others might answer, “De-extinction!” De-extinction—the resurrection of extinct species—might sound like little more than a fantastic technology in (soft) science fiction that is akin to magic, but

it is something that scientists have been working on in the real world. By promising to undo one of the more terrifying prospects of the Anthropocene (i.e., extinction; in particular human extinction, for the idea of the Anthropocene relies on the premise of “the *human as fossil to come*”⁵), de-extinction has the potential, as I have argued elsewhere, to “offset the constant state of ‘out-of-controlness’ characteristic of the Anthropocene condition and promises humans to regain control over the fate of the planet.”⁶ After all, de-extinction radically “challenge[s] our fundamental sense that human life is unidirectional, proceeding ineluctably from conception to death,” as Susan Squier notes with reference to progress in the manipulation of embryonic stem cells.⁷ Since de-extinction allows human beings to reconfigure this monodirectional conception of life and replaces it with a (potentially) serial notion in which an individual’s death may not be final but rather lead to rebirth, de-extinction may well be “the quintessential environmental imaginary of our biocybernetic age, one in which science and science fiction repeatedly double back on each other in the urge to restore lost worlds.”⁸

This is the “good Anthropocene” that, for example, the Breakthrough Institute’s “Eco-Modernist Manifesto” imagines: “A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world.”⁹ The original *Jurassic Park* novel (1990) anticipated these discourses by addressing a different issue haunting our age—the anthropogenic extermination of species. In the book, the narrator explains that “by 1985, it seemed possible that quagga DNA might be reconstituted, and a new animal grown.”¹⁰ The prospect seems barely fathomable: the quagga, a subspecies of the plains zebra hunted to extinction in the nineteenth century, might return to the plains of South Africa, a century after it had disappeared from them. “If that was possible,” the *Jurassic Park* narrator wonders, “what else was possible?”¹¹

De-Extinction and Re-Extinction

In our material reality, the biotechnological power that is de-extinction has one “successful” animal resurrection project to its record. The Pyrenean ibex, referred to as *bucardo* in Aragonese and Spanish, was declared extinct on January 6, 2000. In the nineteenth century, the Pyrenean ibex’s numbers dwindled due to anthropogenic activities and their effects, including overhunting and habitat loss, and in the latter half of the twentieth century, populations were hit hard by sarcoptic mange outbreaks, bringing the species to the brink of extinction. Following a series of failures to clone specimens of the species, a hybrid of a domestic goat and another ibex subspecies calved a Pyrenean ibex on July 30, 2003. The *bucardo* was no longer extinct. However, the little creature died after a few minutes due to a deformation of her lungs.¹² A “hideous progeny” produced by crossbreeding and other forms of human

tampering with life,¹³ the calf saw the light of day without any chance of survival. The first de-extincted animal immediately transformed into the subspecies' second ending, as the subspecies went extinct for a second time minutes after it had become de-extinct.

Nevertheless, the momentary de-extinction of the *bucardo* was a biotechnological milestone. Commenting on “the development of molecular biology” since the late twentieth century more generally, Stephanie Turner has suggested that “species such as woolly mammoths . . . are not lost after all, but continue to exist as genetic codes residing in their remains.”¹⁴ Reflecting on Dolly the sheep, Sarah Franklin has noted that the successful cloning of a mammal produced a hype; it “signifie[d] a reaching beyond, or an expansion of range. Dolly [was] in this sense both a frontier and a horizon—a relational someplace and no place signaling future possibility and direction.”¹⁵ Similarly, the story of the resurrection of the Pyrenean ibex has fueled the imagination. Indeed, although scientists have yet to succeed in replicating the feat achieved in 2003, the Pyrenean ibex was quickly overshadowed by other possible de-extinction projects in the public imagination—the de-extinction of the passenger pigeon, thylacine, aurochs, and the woolly mammoth, among others. As a matter of fact, popular science books, magazines, and newspapers have turned the woolly mammoth into the icon of de-extinction, as articles about its potential resurrection appear with surprising regularity—even if evolutionary molecular biologist Beth Shapiro’s book *How to Clone a Woolly Mammoth* (2015) presents a clear argument that “we will never bring something back that is 100 percent identical—physiologically, genetically, and behaviorally identical.”¹⁶

In this context, the company Colossal Laboratories & Biosciences has been repeatedly in the news in recent months, as its scientists are planning to create “a cold-resistant elephant with all of the core biological traits of the Woolly Mammoth. It will walk like a Woolly Mammoth, look like one, sound like one, but most importantly it will be able to inhabit the same ecosystem previously abandoned by the Mammoth’s extinction.”¹⁷ The company’s website provides ten good reasons for resurrecting the mammoth, including “prevent[ing] the emission of greenhouse gases trapped within the permafrost layer—up to 600 million tons of net carbon annually,” “establish[ing] a proven link between genetic sciences and climate change,” and “equip[ping] nature with a resilience against humanity’s adverse effects on vital ecosystems.”¹⁸ The various texts about the mammoth on Colossal’s website exemplify Adam Searle’s observation that “the mammoth is already engaged in multiple meanings, subject to potentialization as a symbolic project, already guiding scientific and technological innovations of the future. Its resurrection is discussed by de/extinction practitioners with an air of certainty and inevitability, allowing cultural imaginaries to develop as the virtual is interwoven into ideas of wildlife and extinction. The mammoth is cur-

rently actualized in narratives of research and epistemological function; as a means of developing scientific understandings of ecological niches, (paleo)climatology, climate change resilience, human health and epidemiology, and even the prospects of space exploration and terraforming.”¹⁹

Commodifying Resurrection

In this article, I am less interested in how the biotechnological revival of the woolly mammoth becomes connected to mitigating effects of the environmental crisis; rather, I would like to highlight a different part of Colossal’s website to introduce my main topic. On Colossal’s launch page, users can see a stylized motion background, while in the foreground, two lines in large letters proclaim, “Colossal. The science of genetics. The business of discovery” (*Illustration 1*).²⁰ The emphasis on “the business of discovery” makes explicit that much of the fascination with de-extinction is based on speculation. “Speculation” has two meanings in this context: on the one hand, asking questions such as, “What if scientists really were to succeed in bringing these creatures back to life?”; on the other hand, there are financial connotations—de-extinction is an investment that has substantial risk of losing value but also holds the promise of reaping significant profits in the future.



Illustration 1: The launch page of Colossal Laboratories & Biosciences’ website.

Screenshot, <https://colossal.com>. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

Ashley Dawson has observed that “the extinction crisis offers an opportunity to capital for a new round of accumulation. In the name of coping with the decimation of flora and fauna around the planet, the most advanced sectors of capital are rolling out new biotechnologies that... promise to revive charismatic extinct species like the mastodon.”²¹ This connection between the biotechnological manipulation of life and

capitalism is at the heart of the Jurassic Park/World franchise, which has strongly influenced the public perception of de-extinction science. The introduction to the original novel acknowledges that “biotechnology promises the greatest revolution in human history,” but he also makes clear that he considers this new tool dangerous, in particular because of the “astonishing speed” with which “the commercialization of biotechnology” has taken place.²² Despite the explicit criticism of extracting genetic information from dead (or extinct) animals in order to generate profits, Universal Pictures has turned the dinosaur-populated world into a multi-billion-dollar franchise that exploits the public fascination with dinosaurs. While the prehistoric creatures are not the franchise’s only draw, its reliance on dinosaur-related action (and, outside the diegesis, dinosaur-based merchandise) recalls Nicole Shukin’s argument that “the soaring speculation in animal signs as a semiotic currency of market culture” occurs “at the same time that animals are reproductively managed as protein and gene breeders under chilling conditions of control.”²³

Drawing on Shukin’s notion of animals “as simultaneously sign and substance of market life,”²⁴ this article discusses an ancillary text to the Jurassic World trilogy, the videogame *Jurassic World Evolution* (Frontier Developments, 2018). While *Jurassic World Evolution*, similar to the movies, features the critical voices of chaos theoretician Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum), raptor whisperer Owen Grady (Chris Pratt; voiced by A. J. LoCascio in the videogame), and Jurassic World operations manager-turned-dinosaur conservationist Claire Dearing (Bryce Dallas Howard), the game puts players into the role of what I would like to call necropreneurs. Whereas a standard definition of entrepreneurs suggests that they “add value to the economy,”²⁵ the videogame illustrates that this may be the fact in the short run, but in the long run and considering externalities, negative value is the typical end result of capitalist processes. After all, the videogame is based on a necrocapitalist logic that centers on the accumulation of extinctions, for *Jurassic World Evolution* has a serial cycle of de-extinction and re-extinction inbuilt: as soon as, in the words of Claire Dearing’s operations manager persona, the scientists that players manage have developed an “asset” (i.e., dinosaur) that is “bigger, louder, [and has] more teeth” and thus promises to increase visitor numbers and boost revenue,²⁶ the old “products” are phased out and replaced by their successors. In *Jurassic World* (2015), Simon Masrani (Irrfan Khan), CEO of the company that owns Jurassic World, muses that the dinosaur-populated theme park does not seek to generate profits, but rather “exists to remind us how small we are, how new.”²⁷ However, the necropreneurial figure that players control while playing *Jurassic World Evolution* does not leverage the power of de-extinction to confront players with the potentially uncomfortable reality that “the human is but a momentary blip in a history and cosmology that remains fundamentally indifferent to this temporary eruption,” as Elizabeth Grosz put it²⁸; nor do players

and their virtual stand-ins work toward undoing the eradication of species that vanish around the planet at an alarming rate. Instead, they seek to increase profits while serially de-extincting and re-extincting dinosaurs.

Extracting Resources

Jurassic World Evolution is a relatively simple entertainment park management simulation whose main selling points are its affiliation with the franchise and the idea of managing (and seeing) dinosaurs come alive in the virtual world. Accordingly, players are tasked with creating theme parks populated with dinosaurs across a number of (fictional) tropical islands off the coast of Costa Rica. Players need to construct roads, build hotels, security and surveillance infrastructure, shops to sell merchandise, and provide restaurants for their visitors to dine in. Most importantly, players need to set up research infrastructure to uncover fossils and extract the genetic information of the prehistoric creatures to breed the animals and then release them into their enclosures. Once the animals have been released, players need to ensure that the dinosaurs—their investments—remain well-fed, healthy, and content with their lives in captivity.

All of that might sound innocent enough (it's speculative and a game, after all), but this basic outline of the game brings some problematic implications to the fore. Apart from the neocolonial practice of constructing theme parks on remote and seemingly unpopulated islands—the idea of *terra nullius* that runs through the entire franchise draws on the narrative template of colonial “lost world” tales of the nineteenth/early twentieth century²⁹—*Jurassic World Evolution* requires players to acculturate to the virtual world and its operating principles and thus teaches them to act accordingly.

Writing about the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), Patrick Jagoda has explained that “the game generates, in the player, a heightened experience of a dominant economic situation that it does not simply represent but to which gameplay centrally belongs. The game privileges mechanics that train players to become entrepreneurs of themselves who acculturate to its virtual space (at lower levels) by aspiring to a higher rank, following instructions, engaging in war making, and accumulating private property, and (at higher levels) by team building, managing a guild, optimizing combat strategies, and administering resources.”³⁰ A similar process is at work in *Jurassic World Evolution*, as the videogame instructs players to generate revenue, extract fossils, produce dinosaurs, and eventually replace them with better “models” as soon as they are available to generate more revenue, etc. As Cabot Finch, head of public relations and crisis management and the guiding voice in the game's tutorial explains, “Create dinosaurs, which

attracts visitors to your facilities, brings in capital—*money*, which means you can do more research to build better facilities and create more dinosaurs, and there you go: a circle of life; development and resources; nature and commerce.”³¹ This notion of players controlling the “circle of life” tries to veil the fact that players, in fact, manage a circle of death centering on designing and killing prehistoric creatures.

The production of dinosaurs is underpinned by neocolonial extraction networks. Although the majority of dig sites are located in North America, there are also sites in places such as Argentina, Mongolia, and Niger that may be harvested with reckless abandon (**Illustration 2**). The videogame ignores legal complications as to whether one digs on federal, state, private, or tribal land in the United States and that (real-world) Mongolian law considers fossils “part of the nation’s cultural heritage,” which is why they “cannot be exported.”³² The costs of expeditions differ in the videogame, but the expenses seem to be primarily related to how attractive the dinosaur in question will be for visitors—and thus profitable for players, suggesting that the resources are available for the players’ extractive practices if they are willing to invest some money. While Souvik Mukherjee has rightfully explained that play provides “a way of constantly subverting the ‘centres’ that colonialism tries to construct,”³³ *Jurassic*



Illustration 2: Map of the extraction sites (light blue, green, and red dots) in *Jurassic World Evolution*.

Illustration composed of several screenshots from *Jurassic World Evolution* © Frontier Developments, 2018 (Xbox Series X version). Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

World Evolution's inconsiderate replication of colonial systems, which exploit the colonies to enrich the corporate imperial center, requires players to re-enact colonial fantasies.

At the same time, these underlying ideas expose paleontology as “a mode of accumulation, on one hand, and of dispossession, on the other”³⁴—a colonialist form of extraction par excellence. Indeed, an increasing number of geologists and paleontologists have acknowledged that colonialism has shaped the geosciences.³⁵ In the context of the United States, Lawrence L. Bradley has demonstrated that “the emergence of vertebrate paleontology as a scientific discipline can in part be attributed to large vertebrate fossils discovered on land inhabited by indigenous populations,” which is why “vertebrate fossils are yet another natural resource dispossessed from subjugated peoples like the Sioux of the Northern Great Plains of the United States.”³⁶ The location of the fossil sites in *Jurassic World Evolution* connects the videogame with these historical contexts by aligning the dig sites with the westward expansion of the nineteenth century and the iconic Bone Wars, in which Edward Drinker Cope and Othniel Charles Marsh competed over fossil finds.³⁷

Similar to the colonial myths and racial hierarchies that provide the basis for the exploitation of “less developed” countries and their peoples, animals have long and often figured as life forms that are inferior to (White) humans in Western discourse, as “we eat, hunt, torture, incarcerate and kill animals because it is our sovereign right won from total victory; our sovereign pleasure.”³⁸ In *Jurassic World* (i.e., the park), this disregard for animal lives results in a situation in which every facet of the dinosaurs' lives is structured in ways that allow the park management (i.e., players) maximum surveillance of the animals and effectively absolute control to intervene in their lives. Although players cannot directly kill the dinosaurs (by shooting, euthanizing, or poisoning them), they may let a specimen that is no longer wanted die of thirst or starve to death, or they may transport it into the enclosure of a large carnivore that is certain to kill it. Quite literally, players have the “power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death,” as Michel Foucault notes in his elaborations on biopolitics. Notably, Foucault also suggests that capitalism “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production.”³⁹ While Foucault refers to human labor in this instance, the statement applies to *Jurassic World*'s dinosaurs, as well, as the animal's bodies are what makes possible the park's capitalist venture.

Necropreneurship

In order to progress in this capitalist endeavor, the videogame employs a mechanic that is typical of strategy games: the technology tree. For the uninitiated, “the eas-

iest way to conceive of a technology tree,” Will Slocombe writes in an article on representing and simulating science in the Civilization series, “is to imagine a genealogical tree of technologies in which earlier research provides the basis for a civilization to discover more advanced technologies. That is, each technology . . . is discrete and leads to others.”²⁴⁰ In *Jurassic World Evolution*, players first need to build a research center to access the technology tree, which has eight branches: buildings, building upgrades, global operations, medical treatment, genetic research, fossils, paleobotany, and enclosures (Illustration 3). In order to unlock new stages in the various branches, players have to invest money and/or complete certain goals in the game, such as reaching a certain park rating, completing missions, and/or completing the genome of dinosaur species.



Illustration 3: Part of *Jurassic World Evolution*'s technology tree.

Screenshot from *Jurassic World Evolution* © Frontier Developments, 2018 (Xbox Series X version). Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

The research areas most relevant for this article are the ones directly related to dinosaurs: fossils, medical treatment, and genetic research. Genetic research allows players to alter certain traits in dinosaurs. For example, changing the dinosaur’s skin pattern increases its rating, which attracts visitors; in addition, the increased dinosaur variety makes visitors happier. Likewise, making a carnivore more aggressive by tampering with its genes requires additional security measures but allows the park to generate more income. Medical research allows players to develop breeding countermeasures and treatments for various diseases, which also increases visitors’ satisfaction, as they do not like to see sick or wounded dinosaurs. Research in fossils,

finally, unlocks new excavation sites, where players send dig teams (after building an expedition center) to search for fossils. From the fossils, scientists extract genetic information. Once a dinosaur species' genome is completed to fifty percent, specimens of that particular dinosaur may be produced, although the risk of unsuccessfully “manufacturing” dinosaurs (as Ian Malcolm puts it at one point⁴¹) is higher the more gaps in the genetic sequence there are. Accordingly, the game incites players to complete the dinosaurs' genomes, in particular because completing the genomes of specific species is key to taking the final steps in the biotechnological mastery of prehistoric life: genetic hybrids, which were introduced to the storyworld in *Jurassic World*. Of course, as geneticist Henry Wu (BD Wong) is quick to emphasize in the movie, “nothing in Jurassic World is natural; we have always filled the gaps in the genome with the DNA of other animals,”⁴² but *Jurassic World* introduced a creature to the franchise that combines the genetic information of various dinosaur species—the Indominus rex, which was followed by the Indoraptor in *Fallen Kingdom* (2018). To unlock the Indominus rex in the videogame, players have to complete the genomes of the Tyrannosaurus rex and the Velicoraptor; in order to produce Indoraptor specimens, the Indominus must be developed first and the reputation of the security team in the park on Isla Sorna must reach a certain point. To the two hybrids known from the movies, *Jurassic World Evolution* adds the Ankylodocus (complete genomes of Ankylosaurus and Diplodocus required), Spinoraptor (Spinosaurus and Velociraptor), and Stegoceratops (Stegosaurus and Triceratops) (**Illustration 4**). The proliferation of dinosaur hybrids suggests that Jurassic World's scientists have truly cracked the code of life, which results in their “growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate . . . living creatures,” to draw on Nicolas Rose's reflections on genetic engineering.⁴³

Beyond simplifying complex technological developments into discrete series of steps, what is crucial here is that the spatial limitation of the theme parks asks players to resurrect dinosaurs in serialized fashion: to de-extinct dinosaurs only to re-extinct them as soon as a more profitable successor is waiting in the petri dish, as the de-extinct species (usually) becomes de-extinct again (de-extinct²?) upon release of the next generation. In so doing, *Jurassic World Evolution* taps into a very basic understanding of what economist Joseph Schumpeter termed “creative destruction.” Schumpeter observed an “evolutionary character of the capitalist process” that he described as a “process of industrial mutation . . . that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.”⁴⁴ Schumpeter primarily focused on groundbreaking innovations in manufacturing that lead to the dismantling and/or complete re-configuration of an industry. However, the term has, in particular in the more recent past, taken on a life of its own and taken on different connotations. What has remained unchanged,



Illustration 4: Hybrid species in *Jurassic World Evolution*.

Screenshots from *Jurassic World Evolution* © Frontier Developments, 2018 (Xbox Series X version). Images used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

though, is that “creative destruction” suggests progress and economic growth by constant innovation, which, following a Social Darwinist logic, punishes those who cannot keep up.

However, what usually remains unsaid is that Schumpeter drew on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s writings in his conceptualization of creative destruction (even though Schumpeter makes this point clear). In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels suggest that bourgeois society cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing its means of production and, thus, constantly re-configuring society.⁴⁵ The emerging crises that capitalism produces result in the growing disproportionateness of the economic development of society and its relations of production, which, in turn, leads to “the destruction of capital, not by relations external to capitalism, but rather as a means of self-preservation.”⁴⁶ In short, Marx saw capitalism’s self-destructive tendencies. In his contribution to the volume *Anthropocene or Capitalocene* (2016), tellingly titled “Accumulating Extinction,” Justin McBrien draws on these ideas to develop the concept of the Necrocene.⁴⁷ One of McBrien’s key points is that capitalist production draws on past extinctions in the form of fossil fuels (albeit extinctions that occurred millions of years before dinosaurs dominated the planet) and leads to present and future extinctions by the seemingly endless need to grow.

Jurassic World Evolution transforms this idea into its central game mechanic, as the business that players run is based on the idea of resurrecting extinct species, only to kill them when a more profitable species or modified specimen has been developed. This is accumulating extinction. As such, *Jurassic World Evolution* asks

players to perform what I would like to label necropreneurship. This concept draws on the notion of the Necrocene and what Bobby Banerjee has called “necrocapi- talism,” which, in turn, draws on Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, which he defined as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death.”²⁴⁸ Banerjee’s notion of necrocapitalism centers on “violence, dispossession, and death that result from practices of accumulation.”²⁴⁹ While Banerjee’s focus is a regime of capital in which Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies are disposable—in particular if that guarantees the continued accumulation of capital—I would argue that a similar process (*possibly* sans dispossession) is at work when it comes to animal life. In part due to the underlying capitalist principle of “cheap nature,”²⁵⁰ animals are disposable. Animal deaths fuel the capitalist economy, no matter whether they may be killed to be served as food, because their habitats are destroyed to grow more soy or palm trees, because animals used for production can no longer produce, or because their organic remains transform into materials that humans turn into fossil fuels. Death is part of the system. Accordingly, necropreneurship is not so much a radical change in the conceptualization of entrepreneurship, but rather uncovers what entrepreneurial practice in a capitalist system is all about: death, destruction, and extermination (rather than extinction).⁵¹ Capitalism ultimately destroys its material foundations and thus itself.

Necrofuturism

Drawing on Dolly Jørgensen’s work on recovering lost species, one might say that de-extinction “look[s] to the past in the service of the future.”⁵² De-extinction embodies hope by promising to undo extinction; however, *Jurassic World Evolution* illustrates that de-extinction projects past mistakes into the future, which may be repeated—not *ad infinitum*, because there is an end to this cycle of extermination and destruction.

William E. Connolly has concluded that “we are participating in a new mass, cross-species extinction event, triggered by extractive capitalism.”⁵³ *Jurassic World Evolution* is not at all critical of how extractive capitalism has caused biodiversity loss across the globe but rather turns this ecological disaster into another source of virtual income. This idea very much continues the Western path of progress, which is based on “an economic system and culture founded on a drive to annihilate every- thing in its path.”⁵⁴ In our world of turbo-capitalism, there does not seem to be the need to consider long-term effects—not in terms of human lifetimes, definitely not on the scale of geological time. After all, to quote John Maynard Keynes out of context, “*in the long run we are all dead,*” anyways.⁵⁵ Indeed, as Ramachandra Guha details, capitalism may “have brought, in some areas and for some people, a genu- ine and substantial increase in human welfare,” but these processes “have also been

marked by a profound insensitivity to the environment, a callous disregard for the needs of generations to come.”⁵⁶

De-extinction oozes nostalgia for a past that never was and promises a future in which biodiversity loss is a problem of the now-turned-past, a problem left in the rear-view mirror of technoscientific progress. Despite its visual focus on lush greens and paradisiacal islands, deep down, *Jurassic World Evolution* implies what Gerry Canavan has called necrofuturism—the game “premediates the . . . economic and ecological future that will emerge out of current trends.” Canavan, writing about the film *Snowpiercer* (2013), suggests that necrofuturism “resigns us to a coming disaster we can anticipate but not prevent.”⁵⁷ As a videogame, which “without the active participation of players and machines” would “exist only as static computer code,”⁵⁸ *Jurassic World Evolution* takes this idea a step further, however: we explicitly play our part in bringing about this economic and ecological future. In order not to become imbricated into this system, one would need to decide not to play along by either putting down the controller or shutting off the system.

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- 56 Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000), 145.
- 57 Gerry Canavan, “If the Engine Ever Stops, We’d All Die: *Snowpiercer* and Necrofuturism,” *Paradoxa*, no. 26 (2014): 42.
- 58 Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

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Reviews

edited by
Joshua Parker

Abstract

Philipp Reisner reviews R. R. Reno's *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Gateway Editions, 2019) and Martin Gabriel reviews Jonathan Singerton's *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy* (University of Virginia Press, 2022).

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Reviews

edited by
Joshua Parker

***Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West.* By R. R. Reno. Washington, D.C.: Gateway Editions, 2019. xviii, 182 pp.**

Philipp Reisner, Johannes von Gutenberg University Mainz

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The recent revival of American religious history from a transnational perspective encourages one to take a closer look at contemporary Christian periodicals and monographs in the United States. In the tradition of Richard John Neuhaus's famous *The Naked Public Square* (1984),¹ Russell Ronald Reno believes that the main problem with Western society today is a moral rather than a material war between the rich and the poor: the rich avail themselves of a politically correct non-judgmentalism, which the poor take at face value, thereby perpetuating their own miserable predicament. Reno previously laid out his view of contemporary politics and religion in *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (2016).² He succeeded Neuhaus as editor of the ecumenic Catholic American journal *First Things*, and, like Neuhaus, is a Protestant-Catholic convert. Interestingly, in his critique of society, Reno never explicitly articulates his accusation concerning the insincerity of the rich, which seems to be the basis of his argument.

In his latest political essay, *Return of the Strong Gods*, Reno develops his earlier view, according to which the strong gods of early twentieth-century political visions return in contemporary society. Reno deplores the “*anti* imperatives” underlying a political and cultural postwar consensus, openly deploring identitarianism, inclusionism, and what he sees as an increasingly oppressive dominant discourse of political correctness (xi). According to him, these “*anti* imperatives are now flesh-eating dogmas masquerading as the fulfillment of the anti-dogmatic spirit” that came to hold reign as the postwar generation tried to ward off what had brought forth the crises of their parent generation in the early twentieth century.

Reno deplores a “negative piety” and the lack of a transcendent frame of refer-

ence for public policy in this era of “open societies,” an ideal which he is particularly critical of. He sees political correctness already at work in the 1950s (14, 18, 45, 50, 101). This political and cultural postwar consensus is based, according to Reno, on a common opposition to failed political visions of the early twentieth century rather than on a religious, conservative vision of faith. He believes this oppositional stance has weakened the Western tradition and deprived it of a holistic vision of the common good (xii–xiii).

Reno develops his argument in five chapters: “The Postwar Consensus,” “Therapies of Disenchantment,” “Weakening as Destiny,” “The Homeless Society,” and “The Return of the Strong Gods.” He closes with an afterword in which he seeks to rehabilitate the work of the German writer Ernst Jünger (1895–1998). Reno claims that his interpretation of Jünger’s “Bestand” may serve as a wellspring for the modern-day religious and political conservatism he advocates in his monographs and his editorial work for *First Things*.

Readers may take issue with his sweeping argument insofar as the single “Western Tradition” he opposes with his argument appeals to a role for Catholic religious conservatism (if ever so vaguely, but tenaciously) in the “public square” that does not presently exist: Peter Harrison, for example, has shown that the use of “Western tradition” in contemporary political parlance is as vague as it is ahistorical. The title is a placeholder for a whole range of different traditions, since the West was marked for a long time by a capacity to adapt to other traditions without ever clearly adopting and asserting its own.³

Another point of critique is Reno’s use of the term “therapeutic Christianity” (chapter two) in his anti-Protestant polemic. He speaks of the “vacuous therapeutic clichés of ‘growth’ and ‘self-acceptance’” in a similarly dismissive manner. He targets the idea that postwar societies should relax their “cultural super-ego,” which he sees as an outgrowth of the individualist postwar consensus (31, 44). In connecting “therapeutic Christianity” to the Weberian theory of disenchantment, Reno links two especially vague concepts that belong rather to a history of ideas. He contrasts the postwar fear of the authoritarian personality with the “therapeutic personality” and the “ascendancy of a therapeutic mentality,” seeing the postwar consensus as dependent on “psychological help from therapists” for the individual due to its overall spiritual and dogmatic dearth (92, 95, 141). For this, he adopts the theories of the American sociologist and cultural critic Philip Rieff from his work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (1966).⁴

In addition to diverting attention away from contemporary developments and shortcomings of the Catholic Church, Reno’s perspective silences the latest findings of the psychology of history when he claims that “it is high time that we recognize

our intellectual, moral, and spiritual freedom from the traumas that so affected our grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents” (xv). Yet he seems to undermine this very claim when he speaks in the same breath of “curses we have inherited, a sin of the fathers visited upon their sons unto the third and fourth generations” (xv–xvi). His denial of the findings of a broad strand of research on inter-generational trauma and the epigenetics of trauma is misleading,⁵ for he resorts to the visions of these generations when referring to Ernst Jünger.

In Reno’s view, humans are inheritors of a tradition of faith, but not subjects endowed with a complex emotional inheritance that shapes and limits their “intellectual, moral, and spiritual freedom.” One may object that his view of the “solid convictions about what it means to be human” is therefore incomplete. It is this same view that underpins his discussion of “The Homeless Society” in his penultimate chapter, calling for a new sense of home (15, 97–134). Ultimately it is unclear why his preferred subject is “the Western tradition” and its decline, when his own personal faith, namely, Roman Catholicism, presently sees its greatest development not in the West, but in Asia.

Despite my critique, this political essay is worth reading in order to familiarize oneself with a voice that, in all likelihood, is not going to disappear soon. It is best read alongside Reno’s other publications, especially his commentary on Genesis (2010),⁶ which may spark reflections on how theological thought and exegesis may go hand in hand with political and missionary intent. Overall, a staggering historical selectiveness enables Reno’s sweeping arguments, which may have their greatest value in the merciless mirror they hold up to current “liberal pieties,” revealing to what extent contemporary liberalism itself bears characteristics of dogmatic belief.

Notes

- 1 Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984).
- 2 R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (Washington, D.C.: Regeneray Faith, 2016).
- 3 Peter Harrison, “The Paradox of Western Values,” *ABC*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/an-eccentric-tradition-the-paradox-of-western-values/10095044>.
- 4 Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).
- 5 See, for example, Jason M. Fogler and Randall A. Phelps, ed., *Trauma, Autism, and Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Integrating Research, Practice, and Policy* (Cham: Springer, 2018).
- 6 R. R. Reno, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010).

***The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy.* By Jonathan Singerton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022), 352pp.**

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In the introductory chapter of his new monograph, *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy*, historian Jonathan Singerton, a research fellow at the University of Innsbruck, presents a number of arguments for his thesis that the Habsburg monarchy was, in fact, “a focal point in the War of American Independence and exerted an influence on the war’s outcome.” (4).

Singerton reminds us that the Habsburg dynasty shared a common history with America. For generations, Habsburg rulers commanded the Spanish Empire and its overseas possessions. Under Emperor Charles V (King Charles I of Spain), “[t]he meaning and purpose of empire in Europe and overseas, and specific policy questions such as the treatment of the Indians, would engage intellectuals in fierce disputes and important political roles.”¹ Court culture of the early modern Habsburg Empire regularly referred to American traditions and practices. “Emperors Maximilian I through to Rudolf II all collected new-world curiosities for their wonder cabinets” and “Ferdinand I, who was born and raised in Spain, prized his collection of Americana” (17). Collecting artifacts as well as people “put the Habsburg stamp on the region and ensured that evidence of imperial advancement in the Americas was on display. The region’s gold was imperative to Charles’s ambitious visions.”² Singerton also mentions the important role that a *per definitionem* supranational organization played in shaping Central European perspectives of America: the Society of Jesus. “Jesuits from the Habsburg lands enthusiastically participated in the missionising efforts of the order in the Americas” (20)—not only men from German-speaking areas such as Bohemia or Tyrol, but also from Hungarian territories. Printworks such as *Der Neue Welt-Bott*, “a serial publication of missionary letters in the German language . . . redacted with an eye toward an educated audience beyond the Society of Jesus,”³ founded in Graz by Joseph Stöcklein in 1726, had great influence on how Habsburg subjects imagined far-away regions of the world.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, things had changed. The Borbón dynasty was firmly entrenched in Spain, while rule over the Habsburg lands had become more and more centralized (e.g. through the politics of Maria Theresa). The assertion of “a marked decline of hispano-centric Americanism within Habsburg audiences” (23) in the mid-eighteenth century seems most reasonable; it corresponds with the deportation of Jesuits from the Spanish realm, internal conflicts in many regions of Latin America, and the improved position of Britain in the West-

ern hemisphere. Habsburg culture increasingly centered on North American topics. Joseph Haydn composed a number of works specifically referring to this region and, during “the 1760s and 1770s, the figure of the Quaker loomed large” (31). Ranieri de’ Calzabigi, a Tuscan living in Vienna, wrote the libretto *Amiti e Ontario*, a piece in which—quite typically for this period—the “New World” was no longer depicted as primitive, but as being inhabited by a politically and economically advanced population.

In Chapter 2, Singerton directs the reader’s attention toward the American Revolution and its reception in Vienna. “There were, of course, those who disagreed with the American crusade, but they were in a minority. The imperial court at Vienna was a largely pro-American scene” (34). A number of officials sent letters to Benjamin Franklin, while newspapers such as the *Wienerisches Diarium* reported regularly (and seldom hindered by censorship) about developments in America. The British ambassador in Vienna, Robert Murray Keith, “felt that an information war was being waged... between him and those advocating for the Americans” (43). So, while Austria did not participate in the military conflict, it certainly was, as Singerton makes clear, the scene of propagandistic battles. As the author points out in Chapter 4, maintaining Habsburg neutrality was also no easy task, with the port cities of Livorno (Tuscany) and Ostend (Austrian Netherlands) being two globally neuralgic positions. Habsburg’s underestimated network of maritime connections “expanded and contracted in the turbulent wake of the American Revolution” (77).

The reader is then presented an account of the early stages of diplomacy between American negotiators such as William Lee (who made a secret entry into Vienna in 1778) and Habsburg officials. According to Singerton, American “militia diplomacy”—the sending of uninvited envoys—was a fascinating approach for many Europeans. Singerton tries to detach developments from personal stories to show the larger picture of political and strategic activities. “American diplomatic failure in Vienna resulted from multiple factors, not just one man’s deficiencies” (118). Singerton identifies errors by the French ambassador as well as British successes in obtaining promises from the Habsburgs as main reasons for American diplomatic failures during the War of Independence; once again, this highlights the multilateral dimensions of Habsburg-American relations. In the meantime, Habsburg traders continued to profit from developments in the larger Atlantic world: “Ostend flourished in the later years of the conflict as the only neutral port in northwestern Europe” (120), while banks and businesses from Trieste were also actively engaged in North American markets. After United States independence had been recognized by the British in 1783, “attentiveness to the importance of transatlantic commerce replaced difficult political considerations of [Habsburg] neutrality” (143). Singerton again focuses on the ports of Livorno, Ostend, and Trieste, but he also mentions the importance of transatlantic business for other parts of the realm, including Carinthia, Styria, and

Bohemia. However, some trades also suffered from the new peace: revenues of Hungarian tobacco production had skyrocketed during the war, “yet, with the cessation of hostilities, boom inevitably turned to bust as American exportation resumed and Hungarian suppliers could not compete” (161).

In chapters 8 and 9 of his study, Singerton devotes his attention to the early stages of official Habsburg representation in the United States as well as the “second struggle for recognition between the Habsburg Monarchy and the United States” (190). He analyzes the mission of Baron Frederick de Beelen-Bertholff who, for six years, served as Habsburg commercial adviser in the United States, deals with attempts to finalize a commercial treaty, and shows how Thomas Jefferson’s pragmatism (prioritizing even second-rate Atlantic powers like Sweden over Austria) defined international relations. Judging Jefferson’s strategy harshly, Singerton asserts, “His actions helped set back the progress of US-Habsburg relations for a generation” (207). During the late 1780s, important transatlantic businesses such as the Austria-American Trading Company and the firm of Ignaz Verpoorten in Trieste ceased operations or collapsed. Ironically, from 1792 onwards, Thomas Jefferson “obtained at least 1,630 panes of Bohemian glass” (214), which he deemed best-suited for renovation of his house at Monticello. On a political level, the ideas of the American Revolution continued to resonate in Habsburg lands, especially the Austrian Netherlands and Hungary, where activists like Jan-Frans Vonck or József Hajnóczy, a legal theorist who “published his own works extolling the wisdom and virtue of the American laws” (223), identified closely with the new republic.

Singerton’s book sheds light on an often-ignored chapter of international relations in the early modern period. His concise monograph shows that the assumption of North America (or the new United States)—a region defined through ideals of “progress” and “freedom”—and the Habsburg Monarchy of the Haus Österreich—usually depicted as conservative and hostile towards modernization—existing in two separate worlds without really influencing each other cannot be upheld. While it seems logical that with two great powers (an “old” and a “new” one), there had to be a number of reciprocal connections, Singerton supports this argument convincingly through the results of extensive archival research in the United States, Austria, and ten other countries (including Belgium, Italy, and the United Kingdom). *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy* should be considered a “must-read” for every scholar of eighteenth-century Austrian and North American history, but the book also provides relevant insights into early modern international relations and trade policies. While one could criticize the book for largely ignoring the opinions of “average” people in cities such as Vienna (where a critical mass of people interested in American issues existed), Singerton’s work, with its focus on diplomacy and trade, undoubtedly constitutes an important addition to international history.

Notes

- 1 Juan J. Linz, "Intellectual Roles in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Spain," *Daedalus* 101, no. 3 (1972): 59.
- 2 Katherine Bond, "Mapping Culture in the Habsburg Empire. Fashioning a Costume Book in the Court of Charles V," *Renaissance Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018): 553, DOI: [10.1086/698140](https://doi.org/10.1086/698140).
- 3 Ulrike Strasser, *Missionary Men in the Early Modern World: German Jesuits and Pacific Journeys* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 208.