

Reflections on the Counter-Revolution in San Francisco

By Eric Rozenman (October 2017)



Outside Lands, Peter Max, 2013

It was 103 degrees Fahrenheit, a San Francisco record for September 2. From high in the upper deck of AT&T Park, we watched the Giants beat the Cardinals 2-1 in 10 innings. It was too hot for peanuts, popcorn or Crackerjacks but not for overpriced beer, lemonade and water. Desultory breezes eventually reached the four of us—my wife, cousin, his young daughter and myself. Though sun-block coated and shaded by the stadium's overhang we glistened in the heat. In "McCovey Cove" just beyond the right field wall boats—sail, motor and kayak—gathered as usual, occupants lounging in anticipation of a home run ball, one or two sailors leaping in to cool off.

During the long Labor Day weekend, Northern California baked in an unprecedented heat wave. Temperatures topped 100 daily until breaking our last night in town. Average for early September was 70, *The San Francisco Chronicle*—page-wise a

sickly shadow of its former self, content still robot-left-reminded us. A sweatshirt purchased on a previous summer visit remained in a suitcase.

We reached the ballpark via Lyft from Golden Gate Park after a stroll through the lovely Japanese Tea Garden and lunch in the DeYoung Museum. The expansive park itself was, despite the heat, busy with joggers, bicyclists and walkers. Offerings in the museum cafeteria did not so much shout "California cuisine!" as assume it. From avocado to fennel, quinoa to yogurt, salad and soup, with appropriate wines, it was more than delicious. It was informed. I eat, therefore I am. I eat woke, therefore I'm the utmost.

The DeYoung, in a modernist structure with a surplus of dramatic wasted space apparently mandatory in newer public buildings—atria uber alles—boosts a fine collection of American art from various periods. Exhibits are intellectually defaced, however, by explanatory placards in curatorese. These repeatedly insinuate the various artists' intentional or subconscious racism, cultural ethnocentrism and/or other benighted attitudes presumably shed by quinoa eaters. Such "Polly-want-a-cracker!" anachronisms, however, suggest not enlightenment but rather two-dimensional presentism.

Our Lyft driver was a young man from Houston, who said he also worked in an Apple store and, as a newly-minted city resident, attended San Francisco Community College free. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, he'd talked to his mother in Texas. "She's safe, but the house is pretty much gone. I saw a video of the neighborhood on the TV news." I said I'd seen a picture in *The Chronicle* of Houston residents standing guard next to a hand-lettered sign reading "Looters will be shot." "I don't know why people are so quick to resort to violence," he replied. "A lot of people are poor to begin with and might have to take what they can to survive."

Our objective being to cut through traffic and get to the game

in time and the driver not being particularly aggressive, I kept my eye-rolls to myself. I did not suggest he was maligning a majority of the poor, who like the majority of middle class and wealthy people, for some reason do not loot or steal. The possibility such undocumented acquisitive behavior might violate the moral-ethical imperative of the eighth commandment also passed unmentioned.

Adding to the weekend's abnormal climate was a chain of brush fires in mountains east of the city. The result was a haze that diffused sunlight and clouded otherwise postcard-perfect vistas all the way across the Golden Gate Bridge, through God-and Internet billionaire-favored Marin County and into Sonoma wine country along Highway 101. Once the route of teenaged lore immortalized in song ("Black Denim Trousers and Motorcycle Boots") but now an expressway through suburb and exurb, the road took us 60 miles or so to Francis Ford Coppolla's immaculate-looking winery and spa.

Besides the gift shop, tasting bar and restaurant—with artifacts from the director's many films—there wasn't much to see. No tour of the winery itself or walk through the orderly vineyards, even when under a less merciless sun. Highlights were a spit-polished Tucker automobile from Coppolla's movie of the same name, revolving slowly, endlessly on a large turntable in the middle of the gift shop, and a few of the guests revolving from cabanas to the pool and back. They were nearly all women, perhaps on day trips or waiting for their men to join them later in the weekend. A few luxuriated in bikinis cut so high on the hips that they made little pretense of covering the buttocks. Sexy or slovenly, empowered or exhibitionist? Does that depend on where the tattoo is engraved, or on how many there are?

Delaying lunch, we drove out of Sonoma and back to Sausalito to eat. We wanted to see how the other half, that is, the lower upper class, lives. Slumming it, comparatively speaking, we avoided nearby Tiburon. Two-bedroom, two-bath hillside

condos overlooking the bay in Sausalito go for more than \$1 million. Two-bedroom, one-bath, living room/kitchen combined condos in San Francisco go for more than \$1 million, and the buildings aren't necessarily new. Middle class in the Bay area means you earn six figures annually, and not just barely. You send your child—or children, theoretically, if husband and wife, or husband and husband or wife and wife both earn well into six figures—to private school, Democratic Party registration notwithstanding. Or you could buy a new car and parking space and hazard public schooling.

We discovered we were a day early for the Sausalito Labor Day weekend art festival. No matter, we enjoyed a late lunch on the deck of a marina-side restaurant. It was relaxed, pleasant and affordable. Who were the help, we wondered, and where could they afford to live?

A reconditioned wooden yacht, its long black hull and cream-colored cabin accented with barn reds, gleamed on the back of a transport trailer. We watched appreciatively as the driver delicately maneuvered the big rig past the restaurant toward the marina gate. He dismounted to fold in the truck cab's outside mirrors, to no avail. A small Hyundai Elantra in the last parking space before the gate denied him clearance. The teamster walked to the restaurant deck. "Anybody know whose car that is?" he said, pointing. My wife and I already were rising from our chairs.

U-turning the rental through the gate, we whirled back out in front of the transport. A sign on the cab advertised a marina and shipwright in Maine. Who could afford to buy such a yacht, have it reconditioned, trucked across the continent and berthed in California? Apparently more than a few people. The marina was full of boats, many smaller, many larger, some more properly called ships. If Magellan's expedition had consisted of five of the latter instead of its carracks and caravel, it probably would have circumnavigated the globe in one year, not three, and returned to Spain with most of its vessels and men.

A noon-time stroll around bustling Union Square in downtown San Francisco, past not only Macy's and Cheesecake Factory but also Louis Vuitton, Bulgari and Vera Wang, a Grand Hyatt and J.W. Marriott Hotel and high-rise office buildings full of high-rise workers, produced only a single man in a business suit. But what a suit!

I'd just reached a men's shop when its door swung open. "Here, let me get that for you, sir!" the salesman said, scurrying ahead of his exiting customer. The latter, 60-ish, about six-feet, two-inches tall, squarely built and silver haired, strode out. Directly ahead of me, he moved quickly through the throng of shoppers, tourists and homeless people. The city's homeless seemed to be everywhere. San Francisco had yet to begin spray bleaching its sidewalks, unlike San Diego, which was trying to combat a deadly hepatitis A outbreak. The disease spreads in unsanitary conditions, including contact with fecal matter left by those defecating along the streets. Two years ago San Francisco did begin painting a few city walls with a repellent that causes urine to spray back onto the shoes and pants of those inappropriately relieving themselves. In any case, some of the people living on the city's sidewalks in heartless homage to personal autonomy looked imminently terminal.

The non-homeless fellow's suit was a rich navy blue, a fine fabric closely—but not too closely—tailored. Polished black shoes, white shirt, bold tie. In the teeming throng—young women in high heels, short skirts, bare midriffs, snug tops and Saks Fifth Avenue bags slung across their shoulders; out-of-towners wearing shorts, sandals and T-shirts; small Chinese women in long, loose blouses and short black pants; the tattooed, the bearded, the girls and women of all ages stuffed into yoga pants; every other person on his or her cell phone—the man in the suit was immediately noticeable. He exuded confidence and purpose. A senior vice president at Wells Fargo, chief investment strategist from Microsoft or,

things rarely quite what they seem, a model from a Gentleman's Quarterly photo shoot? It wasn't Chinatown, Jake, but Chinatown wasn't far away.

Late that afternoon, one more fellow in a jacket, dress shirt and tie appeared. Also silver haired, and though his was thinning and his build was more portly than squared off, his stance a bit stooped, he too expressed unspoken confidence. It was happy hour in the Leatherneck Lounge atop the Marine Memorial Club and Hotel, with its comfortable furniture, numerous conversations, fine view of downtown and countless tributes to Marines and Marine units past and present.

Who would we want making decisions: The young salespeople in the Apple iStore nearby, baseball caps on backwards, or these two geezers in clothes becoming as antique as Washington's breeches in the age of Lincoln? The youth hyper-actively explained the newest features on the latest devices, from which with the proper apps one could control the electric grid in Moldova, reroute airliners or get a hot pizza delivered in under eight minutes. The geezers, who of course also carried smartphones but who probably had others Tweet for them, not only gave the impression they knew whom to hire and fire but also that they had taken a hill or two when necessary.

On Sunday morning, what looked like the best thing about San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum turned out to be closed. In the building, Wise Sons Jewish Delicatessen offered "sandwiches piled with classic deli meats . . . since 5771." That would be all the way back to 2011, for those not on the Hebrew calendar.

The deli says it's "dedicated to building community through traditional Jewish comfort food." No one can be in business just to make an honest buck anymore, especially in the Bay area. In the age of "relationship banking," brand-building and marketing to millennials ever in need of the next big thing, every butcher, baker and candlestick-maker sounds like the

stripper Miss Electra in "Gypsy." "Ya gotta have a gimmick," she sang, "if you want to get ahead." Hers was an electrified G-string. Today it's community building, world improving, a mission, a commitment to . . . Never mind! Give me the damn corned beef on rye, with mustard and a half-crooked pickle. And if you expect a tip, shut up about it already!

Designed by famed architect Daniel Libeskind, the CJM describes itself as "a beaux-arts-meets-modern space." Reviewers invoke the usual suspect terms like "deconstructionist" and "post-modernism." Yawn. Having already seen the DeYoung, the Contemporary Jewish Museum struck us as more warehouse-in-search-of-identity. Lacking a permanent collection, it operates as a gallery by displaying rotating exhibits, hardly a museum. We saw "The 613 by Archie Rand," the traditional 613 Jewish commandments—and you imagined there were only 10?—whimsically rendered in colorful single-panel cartoon fashion. Also whimsically rendered—a few absolutely laugh-out-loud funny, evincing a Mel Brooks'-like high anxiety sensibility—were the many actual drawings in "Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs." Chast has been turning out her stylistically recognizable work for *The New Yorker* since 1978. Rabbi, scholar and stand-up comic—who knew?—Joseph Telushkin, in his book *Jewish Humor*—reminds readers how anxiety, a reasonable response to 2,000 years of exile and oppression, underscored much of Jewish humor. The problem for Chast, like Woody Allen and countless others before and after, is that anxiety eventually debilitates. Inevitably there comes a point at which bloodying someone else's nose becomes therapeutic.

Then there was the CJM exhibit "Lamp of the Covenant: Dave Lane," presumably the artist's take on the *ner tamid*, the eternal light over the Torah ark in every synagogue. Lane fashioned his creation as a "six-ton work suspended high over the heads of visitors. Attached to an enormous oval of steel were antique objects: world globes, light bulbs," apple peelers, blow torches "and various other objects that suggest

the unfolding marvels of the cosmos." No doubt warped by the marvel of child labor in my father's scrap yard—Rozenman & Sons Auto Wrecking, Tiffin, Ohio—the objects suggested something else to me: a long, sweaty day shoveling slag. But, hell, everyone thinks he's a critic. Or an artist, like first-name only Kutiman.

"Kutiman: offgrid offline," the museum described as "minutely edited snippets of music played by soloists found on the Internet" and displayed on 12 monitors that periodically join in or go silent." Kutiman was said to be "a young Israeli musician and composer [who] utilizes found audio and video from the Internet as the source of his own work." Since we spend many waking hours before video screens, minutely editing our own and others work, my wife and I took the museum's word for "offgrid offline" and skipped the installation of screens and speakers in a nearly bare space. Any more minimalist, and it wouldn't have been there at all. Wondering what was particularly Jewish and contemporary about the Contemporary Jewish Museum, beyond Rand and Chast's cartoons, we walked through Chinatown to North Beach in search of poetry and coffee.

North Beach was, and in some respects still is, the old Italian neighborhood. We stopped at Café Trieste, which doubles as a neighborhood coffee shop and tourist site. In Columbus, Indianapolis or Oklahoma City an entrepreneur would buy the place and upgrade it to look like an inviting old Italian coffee shop instead of a moldering old Italian coffee shop. And he or she would hire perky staff who didn't sidetrack your order while talking to an acquaintance. But they probably wouldn't have musicians on the sidewalk early Sunday afternoons playing to an appreciative knot of tourists and old men from the neighborhood, some smoking cigarettes and talking with their hands.

At the table next to us a young couple—he's Anglo, she's Asian—with a baby in one of those expensive three-wheeled

prams such couples seem to prefer, talk and divide the Sunday *New York Times*. Neither takes the "A" section with its *Times'* facsimile of hard news. If the skeletal *Chronicle* is robo-left, superficial and predictable, the still-substantial *Times* is intelligentsia left, convoluted and predictable. They read it apparently untutored in media appreciation. Trump era obsession with the other side's "fake news" obscures our decades-old general contagion of news fakes, aka mainstream media's Pollyannaish reporting of critical subjects from Islamic triumphalism to unfunded and unfundable government debt. Ah, but *après moi* and my latte, *la deluge*.

The evening we visited, young waiters were speaking Italian to each other and to some customers in E Tutto Qua on Columbus Avenue near Broadway. Inside or at street-side seating, downstairs or up, windows all open to the sidewalk, it was still hot even as the sun set. Like many other businesses, not to mention residences in San Francisco, E Tutto Qua ("It's All Here") seemed to lack air conditioning. No matter; it did not want for patrons, an engaging atmosphere or good food.

Across Columbus Avenue lay poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore. At 19, which is to say about half a century ago, I discovered Ferlinghetti's Coney Island of the Mind and, so I thought, a powerful blank verse means of self-expression and understanding. Self-expression first, understanding later. Of course, then I was a sophomore in college and girls, Batman on TV and the Vietnam war were the biggest things, in that order. I bought another paperback copy of the poet's little collection, *Pictures from a Gone World*. In moving, I've lost two previous copies. Maybe a cosmic message. Anyway, some of the poems hold up.

North Beach and City Lights were beat era haunts. City Lights published Allen Ginsburg's *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956. An obscenity trial followed in 1957, a judge ruling that *Howl*, with its many blunt homosexual and heterosexual references, or perhaps references to blunt homo- and hetero-sex, was not

obscene. Whatever, as the court might declare today, *Howl* famously begins:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked/dragging themselves through the negro
streets at dawn looking for an angry fix/ angelheaded hipsters
burning for the ancient heavenly connection to starry dynamo in
the machinery of night . . .

And so on, and on. At 19, it struck me as mysteriously profound, suspiciously repellent and seriously run-on. Stream of consciousness, baby. In those days hipsters was a cool word, not a marketing cliché, and Mr. Wikipedia now says *Howl* is considered one of America's most important literary works. By hipsters, no doubt, but reread it for yourself. See, if it doesn't put you in mind of that Steven Wright joke: "When I first read a dictionary, I thought it was a long poem about everything." The more time passes, the more *Howl* reads like a short dictionary defining Allen Ginsburg's inability to distinguish between Dwight Eisenhower and Juan Peron.

Five large banners draped City Lights. They were drawn in the flat, hard, pseudo-proletarian style one sees on placards and posters of the causes *de jure*. The first four quoted poet Mahmoud Darwish: "Nothing is harder/ On the soul/ Than the smell of dreams/ While they are evaporating." The fifth exhorts: "Stop the Deportations." Under each line of text was a non-Caucasian face.

The banners lacked disclosure. Darwish was a Palestinian Arab supremacist and Palestinian Liberation Organization "cultural affairs" functionary when the PLO was one of the world's leading terrorist movements. His poem "Those Who Pass Between Fleeting Words" told Israelis 10 times in 52 lines to "get out." A revisionist work denying Jews' organic tie to the land of Israel, it instructed them to "pile your illusions in a

deserted pit, and be gone . . . Die wherever you like, but do not die among us . . . ” Posters proclaiming solidarity with undocumented immigrants in general and “Dreamers” in particular were common around San Francisco. But rhetorical hyperbole equating opposition to Trump’s overturning of Obama’s DACA maneuver (Deferred Action on Child Arrivals) with guerrilla resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II raised suspicion.

When lobbyists for unrestricted immigration—which is to say opponents of national identity, or at least American national identity—first pressed Obama on legalizing Dreamers, Obama correctly observed unilateral action by the president would be unconstitutional. But after Congress, the legal embodiment of popular sovereignty, refused to act, he went ahead regardless. Amnesty—deferred action [postponed deportation]—for children infiltrated by parents themselves illegally present in the United States (and sometimes children who border-crossed on their own) became sacrosanct. Like all leftist *causes célèbres*, it melded into the secular fundamentalist catechism, which admits no doubt. A wedge issue for civic deconstruction, it in many cases also is a matter of compassion. Nevertheless, Dreamerism challenges rule of law. And rule of law is what distinguishes America from Cuba, for example. Still, humankind cannot bear too much truth, as T.S. Eliot observed. So smart money does not bet on City Lights publishing a neo-beat epic poem on the Castro brothers’ decades-old policy of imprisoning disagreeable poets and restricting emigration to the States largely to those dreaming of reaching free soil and willing to risk sharks in the Florida Straits—so far 10 percent of the Cuban population.

A weekend evening near but not quite in Chinatown and a half-dozen young women lined up outside a club of some sort. They were dressed pretty much as *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit issue models if the latter wore stiletto heels with Lucite platforms to the beach, which is to say bulging out of and around strategically placed Lycra Spandex straps over satin-like

short shorts. Except for the tallest, prettiest of the group. Over her heels and briefs she wore nothing at all except a wide-mesh, black fishnet top. Her breasts were large, well-shaped and there for all of greater San Francisco to see. My head snapped back as we walked past. My wife asked, "Club-goers, shills for the place, or prostitutes?" True-false or multiple choice? A do-I-look-fat-in-this-fishnet trick question? I can't tell.

San Francisco is like Jerusalem—"builded as a city compact, together" (Psalm 122)—the former with its seven hills, the latter with its 40 or so and both urban areas with numerous, distinct neighborhoods. We took the Hyundai on a spin through the Mission district, the Castro and Haight Ashbury. Gentrification and genteel shabbiness contend, with an occasional residential tent. The once notorious Mission district features the homeless, yes, but also numerous signs in Spanish and inviting corner restaurants, probably not Tex-Mex but just authentic Mex. A morbidly obese woman steers a motorized chair-scooter down the sidewalk, her tiny dog trotting beside on a red leash. We drive through the Castro, busy long-time hub of the city's gay life. Rainbow flags adorn lampposts, their colors and patterns repeated in a crosswalk and on the sign of a nearby used car lot. Three men stand in doorway talking. Two, middle-aged and muscular, wear only red, G-string-like, fringed penis sheaths. The third man converses as if this were normal. Normal—now there's an increasingly hateful concept. Too much normality and one might imagine nudity as a private affair. Pondering the essentially naked men and half-naked young women, not to mention the yoga pantsed legion, we wonder if the less a society values fertility, the more it flaunts sexuality.

Haight-Ashbury affects a 50-year hang-over. It's been half a century since Scott McKenzie sang "If you're going to San Francisco/ Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair/ Summertime will be a love-in there . . ." Yet "Summer of

Love" posters are still on display. Tourists can't escape them, which may be the point but, then, neither can locals. Langston Hughes asked what happens to a dream deferred and provided powerful, unhappy answers. Nostalgia prolonged, on the other hand, curls up like a faded Peter Max poster.

Bay area streets throng with Toyota Priuses, the electric/hybrid automotive equivalent of quinoa. They are a powerful signifier, fashionable in their ostensibly anti-fashionable way. They advertise to all and sundry that the driver practices sustainable living, narrowing his or her carbon footprint. This is done by plugging the coal-fired Prius into an electric outlet for recharging every night. On our way back to the hotel in city traffic we watched as a black Prius in front accelerated—they can do that—pulled left partially into oncoming traffic, straddled the yellow dividing line to pass a slower-moving, hydro-carbon consuming vehicle ahead, and ducked back into our lane. Sustainability confers its privileges.

Our last night in San Francisco we had dinner with Bob and Jane, we'll call them. He describes himself as one of the oldest techies in Silicon Valley. Life was good and he was considering retirement when one of the Big Four Trusts of our age—Google, Amazon, Apple and Facebook—made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Now he commutes in a company bus filled with techies 30 years or more younger than he to a new corporate campus and—sometimes also jetting to other parts of the world—assists this particular robber baron industry move to the next level of controlling what mankind consumes, reads, writes and remembers. Some capabilities "are scary," he acknowledged. And some are life-savers. Not knowing in whose archive it might eventually repose, we did not take a selfie. Early the next morning, we returned to our nation's capital, where some people imagine there is an *e pluribus Unum* nation and they are in charge.

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