

Opening Boxes from 2019. Annals of Corruption: Objects from a Vanished World Reveal Rotten Institutions. Naomi Wolf

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When, in Fall of 2019, I moved out of what had been my home in the West Village, I thought I was simply moving from one place to another. I was excited to build a home again, this time in the South Bronx.

Brian and I ultimately lived in the South Bronx for only four months — until March 11 2020, when we looked at one another and realized we had to get into his SUV and keep driving North. As I described in my book [The Bodies of Others](#), when then-Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that Broadway was closing — just like that, a CCP-style state fiat, not an American-style individuals-dealing-with-an-emergency announcement — we both realized that bad things were coming, though whether natural or political we could not yet tell.

So twenty years of my possessions had stayed for the past two and a half years in a storage unit.

I was opening boxes now that were not just from another place — as is usual when you move; not just from another time; but I was opening boxes that were from literally another world. I don’t know that such a thing has happened in quite this way in history before.

Some items memorialized normal losses and change. Others, though, revealed that long-revered institutions had lost all morality and authority.

Here was a grey sweater that had belonged to my father, who had been a writer. It still had the line of loose threads along the clavicle, the little gaps opening up in the sewn-together pieces, that were characteristic of his distinguished-but-absent-minded-professor look. Dr Leonard Wolf could wear a moth-eaten sweater such as that one, on a street in New York City, and still look like a Byronic poet preoccupied with his latest sonnet. He looked stylish

even when he was bedridden — even when advancing Parkinson’s meant he could no longer communicate with words, his treasure. He was charismatic even when gestures failed him; when my husband, an Irish raconteur, sat by his bedside, telling stories to make him laugh. He managed to have elan even when Brian had to ask him to make a sound to let him know if he wanted the stories to continue, and my dad could only groan: yes, more stories.

The stories have ended now for my father; at least the earthly ones. But the sweater still carries that wintry, breezy scent that was his while he was on this earth, telling us stories, more stories.

I folded my father’s sweater for the mending pile.

A small brown dog toy surfaced, chewed so thoroughly in one section that the white lining of the toy remained. The little dog who had enjoyed the toy, of course, the much-mourned Mushroom, is no more. His dog tag is nailed to a tree that leans over the river in the woods, near where we now live.

I put the chewed-up toy on the discards pile.

There was the little white wooden armoire I had hand-painted — amateurishly but with love — for a child’s room. The armoire was not needed any more. Everyone had grown up.

There were boxes and boxes of what had once been exciting, culturally meaningful CDs and DVDs. I sighed — what to do with these now? The technology itself was obsolete.

Then there were the pillows. Floral pillows. Tufted pillows. Even I knew these were tasteless, and I’d known that even at the time I had bought them. When my loved ones were old enough to notice aesthetics, they would chorus, when I brought home a new find: “Mom! Please! No more *florals!*”

I saw that I had been obsessed then with accumulating not only florals, but warm colors — cranberry and scarlet, terra-cotta and apricot and peach.

With the eyes of the present, and now in a happy marriage, I realized what had been pushing me to acquire all of these redundant soft florals. I had longed for domesticity and warmth, but had been, as a single mother then, dating the wrong kind of man to *get* domesticity and warmth. So I had unconsciously kept choosing softness and coziness in decor, because I had missed it in my relationship.

The man, a gifted, mercurial charmer, had also, in the past few years, passed away; young; of a wasting cancer.

I sighed again, and put the floral pillows in the “donations” pile.

Other items in the opened boxes, however, did not speak of organic loss and change but rather of worlds of authority that had seemed sparkling and real in 2019, but that have revealed themselves since then to be seething with rot.

Here, for instance, was the brown, pleated, Grecian-style dress, with the bared arms and gathered waist, that I had worn to a wedding on Martha’s Vineyard in the early 2000s.

Brown is a color I almost never wear, and I had never worn that Grecian style of formal dress

briefly fashionable in the *Friends* era; so I remembered, as I shook it out into the sunlight of two decades later, that I had felt quite daring that night.

The wedding had been in an event hall nestled in the dunes. Local seafood hors d'oeuvres had been passed on silver trays. The bride had been smoldering and lovely in a white lace Vera Wang (always Vera Wang) dress. All was as it should have been.

The wedding had brought together White House politicians, *Washington Post* op-ed writers and reporters, brash young New York City political speechwriters and campaign managers, and trendy nonfiction writers who were already making names for themselves chronicling the scene. We were all in our mid- to late 30s — we were fomenting change, approving of ourselves, making a difference; we were kind of like *The West Wing*, we thought — (one of our friends consulted for it) — idealistic, unintentionally a bit chic, madly hopeful.

We were the scene.

I almost recoiled now with sorrow and anger. I folded up that dress, thinking about those institutions that had undergirded our optimism that warm night, when our confidence and certainty had rung out onto the warm, salty breezes, along with the sounds of the ultra-hip blues band.

The major newspapers? The once-young journalists? The last two and a half years showed them to be shills for what have been revealed to be genocidal imperial powers. They became media versions of sex workers, scheduling time to deliver blow jobs to whomever would write them the biggest checks.

The once-young, West-Wing-style politicians? The last two and a half years showed them willing to become policy wonks for a global march to tyranny that instrumentalized a murderous medical experiment on their fellow humans; on their very constituents.

Where now were those institutions that at that wedding in the early 2000s, filled us with pride and a sense of mission as we took part in building them?

Imploded morally; left without a shred of authority or credibility.

I put the brown dress on the Goodwill pile.

I turned to an old scheduling notebook — it recorded some visits to Oxford. We'd been at a dinner party in North Oxford, hosted by the Warden of Rhodes House, attended by the Vice Chancellor of the University, as I recall, and by many other luminaries. Indeed, the evolutionary biologist Dr Richard Dawkins had been a guest, pestered, as he no doubt often was, by a dinner attendee who had wanted to talk to him about his atheism.

It had been a sparkling evening, elegant and urbane. I'd felt privileged to be at a table where some of the greatest of minds of my time were gathered, and where the very leader of a great university was helping to convene us.

I loved Oxford with a pure love. The university had sustained a vibrant commitment to the principles of reason and to freedom of speech, for over nine hundred years. It had supported the asking of questions when it was dangerous to ask questions; from just after what used to be called the Dark Ages; through the High Middle Ages; through the Reformation; through the Enlightenment. It had tended faithfully, through the darkest of times, the bright,

unquenchable flame of the wakeful mind of Europe.

That – the legacy of critical thinking of the West – was Oxford’s legacy.

But —in 2021— it had complied with a [requirement](#) that its students endure “online learning”— a demand that had no basis in reason or in the natural world.

This damage done to its trusting young people was a travesty, in my mind, of the great innovation that the University of Oxford had given to the world – the tutorial system, in which being physically present with a couple of other students and with a Don (professor) in his or her study, opens up the dimension of rigorous scholarly discourse in a magical and irreplaceable way.

‘Online learning’? In *Oxford*? An institution that had survived plagues and epidemics that dwarfed the respiratory disease of 2020-2022, that had survived wars and revolutions, and that had taught students nobly in the face of crises of all kinds?

I did not know if I would ever go back to Oxford; and, if I did, what I would find there or how I would feel. I did not even know if today’s Oxford would welcome me back, being, as I was now in 2022, though I had not been in 2019, a “reputational refugee,” having been cancelled institutionally in most of what had been my traditional intellectual homes.

My heart hurt once more. I put the old notebook in the pile for “storage.”

I unfolded a tablecloth I had bought in India. I’d visited a literary conference in Tamil Nadu in about 2005, and had brought the lovely fabric home as a souvenir.

A flood of memories surged as I looked at the once-familiar pattern.

I’d hosted so many parties in my little West Village apartment, centering on that hand-blocked tablecloth. I’d set a big pot of turkey chili — my go-to option, the only dish I could not ruin — pile cut-up baguettes on platters, and assemble bottles of cheap red wine on that tablecloth. Thus I could, as a broke single mom, affordably entertain — and those parties, as I recall them, were fantastic. Crowded, lively, buzz-y, with a sexy, intellectually engaging vibe. Filmmakers, actors, journalists, artists, novelists, academics, poets; a handful of the less-boring venture capitalists; all crowded together, spilling out into the kitchen, the hallways. At a certain point in the evening the noise would crescendo — (my neighbors were tolerant) — into the happy roar of new ideas clashing or merging; new friendships, new contacts, new lovers connecting and engaging.

In 2019, I had been part of the New York City social scene. My life was full of events, panels, lectures, galas, the watching of rehearsals, theatrical opening nights, film premieres, gallery openings. I thought that my place in the society in which I traveled was unquestioned, and that I was in a world in which this calendar of events, these parties, this community, above all this *ethos*, would last forever.

Where was that society now? Artists, filmmakers, journalists — all of the people who are supposed to say No to discrimination, No to tyranny — they had scattered, had cowered, had complied. They had *groveled*.

The same people who had been the *avant garde* of a great city, had, as I have written elsewhere, gone right along with a society in which a person such as I am, cannot enter a

building.

And I had *fed* those people. I topped up their drinks with my affordable red wines.

I had welcomed them into my home.

I had supported their careers. I had fostered connections on their behalf. I had blurbed their books, had promoted their gallery openings, because — because we were allies, right? We were *intellectuals*. We were *artists*. We were even *activists*.

And yet these people — these *same people* — had complied — eagerly! With zero resistance! Immediately! With a regime that is appearing day by day to be about as bad in some ways as that of Marshal Philippe Petain's in Vichy France.

Unthinkable now that I had treated them once as colleagues, as friends.

I had been made into a nonperson, overnight. Now it turns out, as America First Legal found via a recent lawsuit, that the CDC had actively colluded with Twitter officials, in reaction to an accurate tweet of mine calling attention to menstrual problems post-mRNA vaccination, to erase me from the worlds of both legacy media and digital discourse. A smear campaign that was global in its dimensions had been orchestrated with Twitter by the CDC's Carol Crawford, as the internal emails revealed by America First Legal seemed to show. This past week, another lawsuit, by Missouri AG Eric Schmitt, revealed that the White House itself colluded with Big Tech to censor American citizens. My truthful tweet was in that tranche as well.

As if we were characters in a Lewis Carroll book, the world of meritocracy had been inverted.

The highest level of government collusion was directed at me the minute I did just exactly what I have done for 35 years; that is to say, the minute I raised, in the summer of 2021, a grave women's health concern. Confusingly, my advocating in *exactly this way* for serious women's health journalism and for proper medical responses to women's emerging sexual and reproductive health issues, had made me a media darling for 35 years. Indeed, this practice had made me a media darling among *those very people*, who had eaten my food and drunk my wine, while sitting around this very tablecloth.

But now, when I did the exact same thing for which they had long applauded me, I was cast immediately into social outer darkness.

Why? Because the times had changed.

And because the scale of the revenue generated for them by supporting flat out lies, had changed.

Did any of those right-on people — many of them famous feminists, male and female — speak up for me? Did any of them publicly say, Wait a minute, whatever the truth may turn out to be (and I was right, right, right) — this is a serious *women's health issue*? Let's explore it?

Not. A. One.

The bold, brave, edgy New York City *avant-garde*, whom I had hosted for twenty years?

They were scared off by *Twitter*.

That world surely shunned me, and made me a nonperson, overnight. The power of the Federal government is pretty stunning, especially in collusion with the biggest content companies in the world, when you are on the receiving end of being erased by them.

That world rejected me.

But I rejected it right back.

I live in the woods now. Instead of the glitter and din of galas, the chatter of the literati, Brian and I are surrounded by crowds of tall, solemn trees; the excitement of our days centers on sightings of cranes and hawks; the dramas we face involve living near coyotes and rattlesnakes, and evading while yet marveling at the resident adolescent bear. We are making friends with those who grow food, in anticipation of needing to be self-sufficient. We just picked up from farmer acquaintances, to store in a massive freezer, something that was described with a phrase I had never heard in my previous, DoorDash life: our quarter of a cow.

I was gifted a .22 by Brian. He recently bought me a Ruger as well. The world is falling apart even as a new world is emerging. A peaceful person though I am, I realize that we may someday need to hunt for food or perhaps need, God forbid, to defend our home. I am learning to shoot.

The old world, the pre-2019 world, is a scene of wreckage and carnage to me.

The old world I left behind, and that left me behind, is not a post-COVID world.

It is a post-truth world, a post-institutional world.

The institutions that supported the world that existed when these 2019 boxes were packed, have all collapsed; in a welter of corruption, in an abandonment of public mission and public trust. I look at them now the way Persephone looked backward without regret at Hades.

I am living in a new world already — a world that most people can't see yet as it is still being envisioned and built up – painfully, daringly, laboriously. Though it exists at this point in history more conceptually and even spiritually than it does materially and politically, this new world is my home.

Who else lives in the new world?

My husband, who was not afraid to fight for America, and who is not afraid to defend me.

A new constellation of friends and allies, that have emerged since these boxes were packed away, and since the worlds that are represented as if sealed inside them, collapsed with rot.

I work and party now with people who love their country and tell the truth. The people with whom I spend time now are this era's versions of Tom Paine, Betsy Ross, Phyllis Wheatley and Ben Franklin. I don't know how these folks vote. I don't know that they know how I vote. I don't care. I know that they are sterling human beings, because they are willing to protect

the cherished ideals of this beautiful experiment, our native land.

Life experiences don't unite these people with whom I hang out now; social status does not unite them — they come from all walks of life, from every "class," and they pay little or no attention to status or class markers. Politics don't unite these people. What unites them in my view is the excellence of their characters, and their fierce commitment to liberty; to the ideals of this nation.

Oddly, living now in the purple-to-red rural America that my former "people," the blue-state elites, are conditioned to view with suspicion and distrust, I also have more personal freedom than I did as a member of the most privileged class. The most privileged class does not have the greatest privilege of all, that of personal liberty: it is a class that is continually anxious and status-insecure, its members often scanning the room for a more important conversation, its collective mind continually exerting subtle control, both socially and professionally, over other members of the "tribe."

My former elite network paid lip service to "diversity;" but there was a deadening sameness and conformity in our demographics, and that conformity also policed our world views, our voting patterns, even our kids' schools and our travel destinations.

In contrast, people here in deep purple-red country, the ones whom we know anyway, give each other the assumed permission to differ, to have uncensored opinions, to be free.

Even my social media community is not the world I left behind in 2019; I can't even get on those platforms any more, as I am *extra super duper ultra* cancelled.

But I don't know if I'd even want to be in those conversations now; the discourse of the elite left these days, "my people," seems fearful and in-lockstep, scolding and rigid, when I hear exchanges of it.

Now, in 2022, my online community is made up of a world of people whom I never knew existed — or rather a world of people I was conditioned ignorantly to stereotype, and to fear; I am in contact now with people who care about America, who believe in God or in a greater meaning in this world, people who put family first, and who turn out — who knew? — to be vastly open-minded, civilized and decent.

I spend time with people who love their communities, speak out for their actual brothers and sisters, meaning humanity; risk themselves to save the lives of strangers; and care about actual fact-based journalism, actual science-based medicine, actual science-based science.

These days I chat online with people who tell me, unfashionably but beautifully, they are praying for me.

In spite of fighting an apocalypse every day, how can I help but be so much happier now?

I no longer want to sit at a table with people who call themselves journalists, but who deny or trivialize injuries to women at a scale that beggars belief; who give Pfizer and the FDA a pass, and ask them no real questions.

These people, "my people," who were once so erudite, so witty, so confident, so ethical, so privileged — the people of the elite world contained in the 2019-and-before boxes — pretty and well-spoken as they once were, turn out, with the twist of just a couple of years, and

just a bucketload or two of bribe money, to be revealed as monsters and barbarians.

I left the rest of the boxes to open another day. There is no rush.

The institutions the boxes memorialize are dead; and maybe they never really existed, as we believed them to be, in the first place.

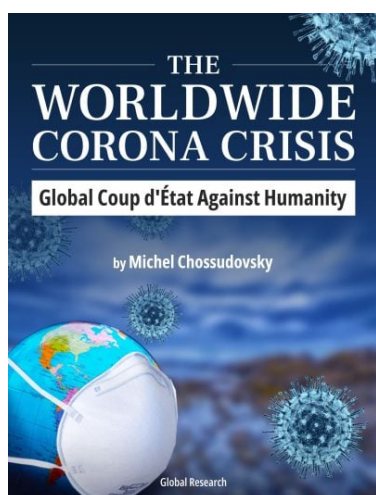
I put the red, purple and blue tablecloth on the “wash and store to use again” pile. Then I took it home with me.

People who still have their honor intact, will sit around our table.

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