A Note to Our Readers

This issue of your magazine was laid out on March 16—the day after undergraduates able to leave by the College’s Sunday deadline had departed; the day most University staff members began working remotely; and two days before scholars were told to suspend or conduct noncritical research remotely for at least six to eight weeks. Thus, apart from a report on page 14, the contents reflect Harvard BC (before coronavirus); professors reexamining U.S. history and vexing policy problems; alumni leading in the arts and letters.

Although profoundly affected, the University remains a preeminent teaching and research institution, and those roles, when fully resumed, will be more critical than ever. Meanwhile, its biomedical experts are focused on critical work on coronavirus, and its affiliated hospitals’ staffs are fully engaged in caring for COVID-19 patients.

As we all enter uncharted territory, we will do our best to keep you informed by continuing to produce and deliver this magazine to you in a timely way. We will report University news online (www.harvardmagazine.com) and cover important biomedical developments as they arise. We ask for your understanding if we encounter glitches along the way. Please support our work to keep you connected to the University and each other (donate.harvardmagazine.com)—and we hope you will also support our advertising partners, when possible, in these challenging times for them and their employees.

Above all, we wish you, your colleagues, and your loved ones safety and health.

—Irina Kuksin, Publisher, and the staff of Harvard Magazine

HEALTHY EATING

I was pleased to see the work Frank Hu and his team did in creating the Healthy Plate—it’s really wonderful to have our dietary recommendations based on scientific rather than corporate priorities (“Healthy Plate, Healthy Planet,” March-April, page 34). I was, however, surprised at the inclusion of tea and coffee as default beverage choices.

Sleep disturbances and deficiencies can contribute to ill-health, in particular to the sorts of chronic diseases the Healthy Plate is intended to prevent. Encouraging people to consume sleep-unfriendly caffeine as part of their meals seems counterproductive.

Rama Kocherlakota, Ph.D. ’89
Burlington, Vt.

AUTHORITARIANISM

Pippa Norris proffers a socio-psychological explanation—no doubt backed by substantial empirical data—for the rise of populist authoritarianism around the world: insecure traditionalists, feeling threatened by the inevitable spread of socially liberal ideas, seek authoritarian leaders to push back the tide of history (“The Authoritarian Reflex,” March-April, page 40). It apparently does not occur to her to seek a deeper cause—perhaps in liberalism itself.

It is common today to equate liberalism with good government. But historically, authoritarianism has surfaced precisely at moments of liberal failure. The reactionary European Restoration was prompted by the disastrous consequences of the liberal revolution in France. Challenges from both left-wing and right-wing totalitarianism thrived on the economic crisis of liberal capitalism in the 1930s. Today’s populist authoritarianism responds to liberalism’s sociocultural as well as economic and political failures.

Jan Ziolkowski, Ph.D. ’78

LETTERS
No one, including Norris, seems to be able to identify the roots of those failures—or even to search for them. Instead, they reassert the superiority of liberalism and try to diagnose its detractors’ wrongheadedness.

Could it be that liberalism is inherently flawed? Could it be that one cannot build a state or society upon the necessary but insufficient principle of individual liberty? Perhaps Harvard’s professors can answer that question—assuming they have the intellectual humility to ask it.

Andrew Sorokowski, A.M. ’75
Rockville, Md.

We live in an increasingly tribal world where it seems that everything is black or white. That makes it much easier for authoritarians, left or right, to unilaterally do whatever it takes to advance their agenda.

There is nothing new or unusual about authoritarianism. Leaders—whether the chairperson of a company, the sheriff of Maricopa County, or the president of the United States—are often prone to authoritarianism if they can get away with it. Unfortunately, there are at least two trends that facilitate authoritarianism at the national level.

First, Congress has ceded everything from the declaration of war to control over a wide swath of our society to the executive branch. Members of the supposedly co-equal legislative branch of government seem satisfied either to cheer on or to attempt to obstruct whoever is in power. We should not forget that President Obama was actually applauded by many of those charged with checking and balancing his power when he said that he would act unilaterally if Congress didn’t do what he wanted, and Donald Trump, of course, is going to build his wall one way or another.

Second, social media make it much easier for authoritarians to communicate directly to their supporters and to “Corker” those tribal members who question them. Our next leader will almost certainly behave more presidentially than President Trump but will also almost certainly govern authoritarily, and their tribe will cheer them on. It is much easier, at least in the short term, to deride those with whom we disagree than it is to engage with them in good faith.

Interestingly, Norris’s conclusion actually illustrates the problem by attributing our authoritarian president and our divide to those who can best be labeled “trivial” and dismissed as “traditionalists who feel threatened, marginalized, and left behind.”

Howard Landis,
M.B.A. ’78
Naples, Fla.

LABOR LAW
“reworking the Workplace” (March-April, page 18) is, in my view, a highly partisan, one-sided depiction of American labor law and labor markets. As General Electric’s chief labor negotiator in many national-level bargaining sessions, I recognized that there were consequential issues of inequality and power in both our company and our country that needed attention and improvement. But Sharon Block’s and Benjamin Sachs’s sweeping prescriptions are insufficiently refined or nuanced; they are the essence of wishful thinking that will not advance us to a useful resolution.

Admittedly, they do their Clean Slate best “to shift power from corporations to workers.” They also engage in gratuitous calumny of a sometimes-flawed Trump administration. Yes, the independent-contractor designation is abused, but giving “workers,” however defined, 40 percent representation on corporate boards is knee-jerk nonsense. I am not holding my breath awaiting your coverage of a similar screed from some arch-apolitical for corporate rapacity. Your readers would be much better served by your reporting on the thoughtful comments of someone like Tom Kochan or Bob McKersie at MIT.

Dennis J. Rocheleau, J.D. ’67
Waupaca, Wisc.

(please turn to page 73)
LETTERS (continued from page 4)

Editor’s note: The article reports on research done at Harvard Law School, and explains clearly the context for the Clean Slate project. Harvard Magazine gladly featured the views of Thomas A. Kochan, of MIT’s Sloan School, in “The Workforce” (September-October 2012, page 39)—in a set of articles on Harvard Business School’s U.S. competitiveness project.

OPEN BOOK
“COURT-ORDERED INEQUITY” (Open Book, March-April, page 56) contains a glaring error. The excerpt, from Adam Cohen’s book, Supreme Inequality, makes the claim that in Jack Gross’s case, the “Court decided, however, that victims of age discrimination had a higher burden of proof [than race or sex discrimination cases] even though the federal laws against race, sex, and age discrimination used identical language.”

This is seriously mistaken. As the Court’s decision makes clear, Title VII was amended to provide that cases thereunder could be based on a claim that improper consideration was a motivating factor for the adverse action. The decision added that while the Age Discrimination Employment Act (ADEA) was also amended at the same time, the relevant provisions that amended Title VII were not included in the ADEA amendments. For Cohen to claim Title VII and the ADEA use identical language is, quite simply, wrong as a matter of law. It is not the Court’s fault for following Congress’s statutes; indeed, given Congress’s clear intention otherwise, it is the dissenters who would be guilty of “judicial lawmaking.”

MARK E. DENNETT, J.D. ’83
Palm Coast, Fla.

Adam Cohen replies: The Court did, in fact, interpret the same language in the two statutes two different ways. The language was “because of,” which the Court construed to make it more difficult for employees to win age discrimination lawsuits. It is true that Congress expressly made clear, in an amendment, that “because of” in Title VII should apply to cases in which discrimination was one of the factors in an adverse employment action, but the Court should have applied the same interpretation in age discrimination cases, since the age discrimination law uses the same wording: “because of.” (Congress has had ample opportunity to say it wants a higher standard of proof for age discrimination claims, but never has.)

The accusation that I made a “glaring error” is reckless and untrue. I adopted the precise logic adopted by the dissenting justices in Mr. Gross’s case—a rather distinguished group: John Paul Stevens, David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Stephen Breyer (the last was my professor at Harvard Law School). Justice Stevens wrote, in a dissent all four justices signed, that “Today...the Court interprets the words ‘because of’ in the ADEA ‘as colloquial shorthand for “but-for” causation.’ That the Court is construing the ADEA rather than Title VII does not justify this departure from precedent. The relevant language in the two statutes is identical, and we have long recognized that our interpretations of Title VII’s language apply ‘with equal force in the context of age discrimination, for the substantive provisions of the ADEA “were derived in haec verba from Title VII”’ (emphasis added). I share those justices’ deep regret that the Court chose to interpret the age discrimination’s “identical” language in a way that has no basis in law and that does grievous harm to older Americans who hope not to be discriminated against when they show up for work.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DIVESTMENT
The letter from William Nickerson ’61 (March-April, page 2) rightly calls for urgent action by Harvard to address the climate crisis. But his idea of action is sadly off base. His objection to divestment ignores the power of symbolic gestures and community pressure. His advice to rely on courses and research was relevant 20 years ago. I salute the Harvardians calling for decisive, visible, urgent action now.

Ironically, the Allston complex he touts will be under water before the buildings are ready for that woefully belated research.

Kitty Beer ’59
Cambridge

ERRATA
In “Legitimate Leadership?” (March-April, page 15), the reference borrowed from Porter professor of philosophy Christine M. Korsgaard should have been “bags full of mice.”

The group photograph in the Vita of William Monroe Trotter (November-December 2019, page 41) should have been credited to the Columbia University Library, and shows Trotter at a gathering, circa 1920, of Liberty League members. We thank Dr. Jeffrey B. Perry for calling this to our attention.

We regret the errors.